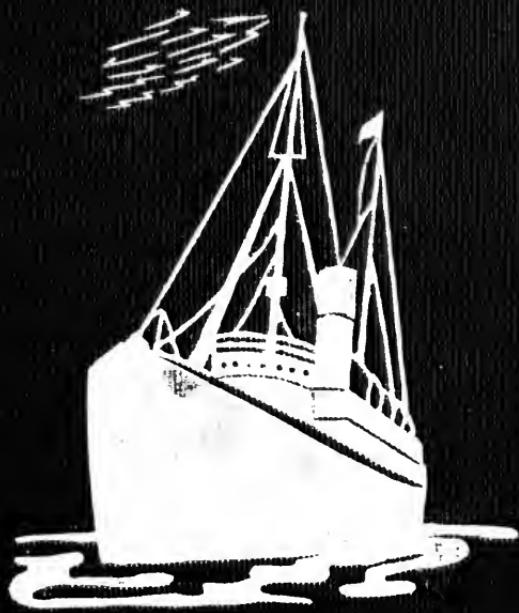


THE GUN RUNNER



ARTHUR STRINGER



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THE GUN-RUNNER

THE
GUN-RUNNER
A Novel

BY
ARTHUR STRINGER
*Author of "The Wire-Tappers," "The Under Groove,"
"The Silver Poppy," etc., etc.*



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PREFATORY NOTE

A portion of this novel was printed in the January, 1909, number of "The Popular Magazine," under the same title which is here used for the story in its complete form.

DEDICATION.

To my old bunkie and friend and camp-mate,

Major Charles Edward Mills

*who in the good days that are gone was known
as "Shorty," and knocked about all the
blessed Seven Seas of the earth and smoked
over campfires in four continents and ad-
ventured up and down the length of the
two Americas and always loved War
and Danger and the Open Road,
and full many a time tramped
and camped and hunted and
went hungry with me, I
most apprehensively yet
affectionately inscribe
this volume*

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THE GUN-RUNNER

CHAPTER I

THE CITY OF PERIL

THE fog groped and felt its way along the water-front. Then it crept up to the throat of the city, like a grey hand, and strangled Broadway into an ominous quietness.

It tightened its grip, as the day grew older, leaving the cross-streets from Union Square to the Battery clotted with congested traffic. It brought on an untimely protest of blinking street-lamps, as uncannily bewildering as the mid-day cock-crowing of a solar eclipse. It caused the vague and shadowy walls of skyscrapers to blossom into countless yellow window tiers, as close-packed as the scales of a snake. Bells sounded from gloom-wrapt shipping along the saw-tooth line of the river slips, tolling the watches and falling silent and tolling again, as they might have tolled in mid-ocean, or on some lonely waterway that led to the uttermost ends of the earth.

Now and then, out of the distance, a river-

ferry or a car-float tug could be heard growling and whimpering for room, as it wrangled over its right-of-way. Everything moved slowly through the muffled streets. Carriages crept across the sepulchral quietness with a strange and uncouth reverence, like tourists through a catacomb. Surface cars, crawling funereally forward, felt their way with gong-strokes, as blind men feel their way with stick-taps. An occasional taxicab, swinging tentatively out of a side-street, slewed and skidded in the greasy mud. Lonely drivers watched from their seats, watched like sea captains from bridge-ends when ice has invaded their sea lanes.

Under the gas-lamps, dulled to a reddish yellow, passed a thin scattering of pedestrians. A touch of desolation clung about each figure that groped its way through the short-vistaed street, as though the thoroughfare it trod were a lonely moraine and the figure itself the last man that walked a ruined world. It was the worst fog that New York had known for years; the city lay under it like a mummy swathed in grey.

Yet the gloom seemed to crown it with a new wonder, to endow it with a new dignity. That all too shallow tongue of land that is lipped by the East and North rivers took on strange and undreamt-of distances. It lay engulfed in twilight mysteries, enriched with unlooked-for pos-

sibilities. Its narrow acres of brick and stone and asphalt became something unbounded and infinite, as bewildering and wide as the open Atlantic. It seemed to harbour fantastic potentialities. It seemed to release the spirit of romance, as moonlight unfetters a lover's lips.

Yet Lingg, the wireless operator of the *Laminian*, became more and more alarmed at the opacity of this fog. He felt, as he burrowed mole-like across the mist-blanketed city, that he had been a fool to leave the ship. He should have listened to reason. And now he had missed his way. He was lost in the very heart of that vast and undecipherable wilderness, which had always filled him with a vague fear, even in the open sunlight, where its serrated skyline reminded him of a waiting trap-jaw. He was hopelessly at sea in the silence which surrounded him, overawed by the quietness which the turn of a street-corner might convert into some perilous ambuscade. Heilig, the engineer, had been right. He'd been a fool to come ashore.

He recalled, a little enviously, the figure of the engineer, the morose and lank and slatternly figure in ragged carpet-slippers, leaning against the ship's rail and smoking the long-stemmed German pipe with its blue china bowl. He remembered the engineer's impassive stare and his almost placid grunt of protest as he wheeled

slowly round towards the solid land that he always seemed to hate.

“Where yuh off to, son?” he asked, as Lingg dropped to the splintered stringpiece of the wharf. The *Laminian* was chafing and fretting against that stringpiece just as his own soul had been chafing and fretting against the desolation of her empty decks.

“Ashore,” Lingg answered, resolutely enough, yet against all the voices of better judgment.

“Wimmin?” demanded the laconic figure against the rail.

“No!” exploded the impatient youth.

“Then what yuh after?” persisted his gloomy interlocutor.

“What am I after?” echoed the other, having no answer ready.

“What d’yuh want with all *that*?” demanded the engineer, with a contemptuous pipe-wave that embraced the entire island of Manhattan.

“I guess I want to mind my own business,” was the reproving answer. It was followed by a contemplative eye-blink or two from the man in the carpet-slippers. But the disgust did not go out of his face.

“No good comes o’ knowin’ hell-holes like this,” he at last averred, with a slow and sagacious side-wag of his head. He spat into the

slip water; it was a rite of his infinite contempt.

“I’m not going beyond Broadway,” the half-repentant Lingg stopped to explain, marvelling at that strange and lonely seaman’s fixed distrust of solid land. He did not think it worth while to enlarge on how sick he was of the ship stink and the quietness, of the fumes of rotting fruit, of the heavy musk-smell of harbour water, and the febrile rattle and clatter of donkey engines.

“Yuh’ll find bad enough b’tween here and Broadway,” avowed the placid misanthrope at the ship’s rail, contemplating his pipe-smoke as though it were incense rising before the epitomised wisdom of all the ages.

But Lingg was not altogether looking for the bad. He had been remembering how one of the junior officers of the *Pretoria*, when in port, spent his two riotous days riding up and down in the Fifth Avenue ‘buses, the delirious ‘buses, which he described as “bee-hives of swarming beauty,” where he was ignored and elbowed and walked over by “the finest women who ever wore feathers,” to his hungering heart’s content. And Lingg, too, was hungering for some glimpse of life beyond that of a dirty fore-deck; for a sight of faces less satyr-like than that of a brandy-steeped sea captain. He

wanted to see light and colour and movement. The unpurged emotional tracts of youth ached for some undiscerned adventure. But above all he was swayed by a wordless, yet none the less compelling hunger to behold the faces of women and girls. Some subliminal sex-hunger, after so many empty days at sea, made him long for that vague upper world which seemed embodied in this very word, *Girls*. He wanted to see them, good or bad, with painted faces or pure. It scarcely mattered, so long as he could look at them. They would all be goddesses to him, Olympian beings who breathed some diviner air, trailing clouds of mystery after their most casual footsteps. He did not ask to walk or speak with them. Their lowliest skirt-swish would seem only too like the ruffle of angel wings. He merely wanted to brush against them, indeterminately, in the city's crowded places, to watch their coming and going, to hear their occasional voices, to let his eyes dwell on their faces as a seaman looks at passing land-lights. For Lingg was still young, clean-living and clean-thoughted beyond the ways of the sailor. Heilig's assistant on the *Laminian* had more than once spoken of him as "Mealy-mouth."

And then, amazingly enough, came the girl herself, without sign or warning.

Where she fluttered or fell from he scarcely knew. It was somewhere in one of the quieter side-streets, and they were standing face to face, almost, when he looked up and saw her. Had he seen a mermaid over the ship's rail it could not have startled him more. There was no evading the situation; there was no chance of being mistaken. It was Adventure, in answer to his prayer. It was Romance, as he had asked. And he had never so much as clapped eyes on her before. Nor was her face a painted face. There was no betraying cupid-bow streak of carmine on the softly smiling lips. There was no barbaric black gum on the undrooping eyelashes, no tell-tale blue paint on the eyelids. There were no disquieting blandishments, no sidelong and predatory glances, no ensnaring simulation of tender levity. His startled eyes could detect no granite savagery under the velvet of her unconcern. She seemed merely Woman incarnate to him, the sort of woman he had sometimes dreamt about on tropic nights when the Southern Cross swung low to the skyline.

“You are Gustav Lingg,” she said quietly, and as plain as day, while his wide eyes still studied every tint and shadow and line of her untroubled face. On that face he seemed to

see nothing but a gentle yet determined abstraction.

"Y—yes," he stammered, vacuously, as though her statement had been a question. A faint tingle of something that was neither fear nor delight went needling up and down his backbone.

"I want to talk to you," the woman said, quite gravely. "I must talk to you—alone."

He knew that she had turned and joined him as he moved wonderingly forward, with his staring eyes still on her. Then the futility, the hopelessness, the impossibility of it all suddenly came home to him. He was conscious of a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. Courage sank away from him, confidence sucked out of him, like water out of an unplugged bath-bowl.

If she had only stood before him less alluring, less Olympian in her loveliness, he might have been less bewildered. If she had been the Other Kind, openly and unequivocally, he might have grown less afraid of her.

But he felt and knew it was a mistake, a foolish and colossal mistake. A vague and slowly mounting fear took the place of his earlier astonishment. The city itself had already intimidated him. He remembered the engineer's opprobrious summing-up of its perils. There was something amiss, terribly amiss.

He raised his hat from his head awkwardly, muttering he scarcely knew what, as he heard her voice again. He backed away from her as she essayed to draw nearer, and stumbled, almost drunkenly, while she stood regarding him in open wonder. Then he turned and fled from her, fled from her, abashed and tingling, fled from her blindly, like a field-mouse from a coiled blacksnake.

He did not stop until he had rounded a street-corner. He felt, as he did so, that he was demeaning his manhood before some possible high adventure. He vaguely suspected that one of life's vast occasions had slipped away from him unrecognised. But he was still afraid, foolishly afraid. He was glad to dip deeper and deeper into the city, as though it were a cleansing bath that might wash away his rubberly awkwardness. He was glad when the fog crept into the streets and helped to obliterate him and his shame. He was glad to wander unknown and unrecognised about the grey-draped solitude that engulfed him.

He knew that the woman had not followed him. But all that afternoon he wandered and tarried and walked about with the feeling that he was not alone. He kept looking over his shoulder from time to time, pondering some wordless yet persistent sense of disquiet. He

felt as though he were being shadowed. He could not shake off the impression that some vague figure or two was guardedly dogging his footsteps.

This sense of being shadowed grew stronger as night came on. It made him doubly anxious to get back to his ship, to know the security of his bald, little, white-painted cabin. It caused him to reiterate to himself the engineer's morose dictum that the city was not to be trusted. He had hungered for the Unexpected; he had been restless for his emprising hour or two on land. But this, he muttered to himself, was the kind of night that took all the curl out of Romance. He was not worthy of the venture. He was better suited to the quietness of a ship's cabin. He disliked the thought of the two pacing shadows that seemed to be following him through the fog. He wanted the *Laminian*'s dirty fore-deck once more under his feet.

He designedly kept out of all danger zones, to make security doubly sure. A thick-voiced man with a black muffler about his throat had trailed after him to demand if he had no old clothes to dispose of. But he did not so much as stop to answer. A stranger in a Stetson hat, still later, caught companionably at his arm and implored him to drink with him. But he freed himself sharply and kept on his way. A figure

or two blocked his path ominously, but he skirted them, as a careful pilot skirts his channel-buoys. He did not care to run risks. He felt that he was still in the land of the enemy. He kept to the open, blindly and doggedly. He knew but one goal, and that goal lay beyond the *Laminian's* odorous gangplank. He fought his devious way towards it, like a spawning sock-eye fighting its way to a river source.

He hurried along the fog-wrapt cañons, still haunted by the impression of some unknown figure dogging his steps. He felt, as night and the fog deepened together, that the city was nothing more than a many-channeled river-bed, and that he waded along its bottom, breathing a new element, too thick for air, too etherealised for water. He saw streets that were new to him, streets where the misted globes of electric lights became an undulating double row of white tulips. Then he stumbled into Broadway. But it was a Broadway with the soft pedal on. Its roar of sound was so muffled he scarcely knew it. Then he came to a square where the scattered lamp-globes looked like bubbles of gold caught in tree-branches. Under these tree-branches he saw loungers on benches, mysterious and motionless figures, like broken rows of statuary, sleeping men in the final and casual attitudes of death. Above these figures he could see wet maple-

leaves, hanging as still and lifeless as though they had been stencilled from sheets of green copper. His eyes fell on floating street-signs, blurs of coloured electrics cut off from the invisible walls which backed them. He caught glimpses of the softened bulbs of automatic signs, like moving gold-fish seen through frosted glass. Then he saw more lights, serried lights, subdued into balloons of misty pearl. They threaded the façade of some gigantic hotel, like jewel-strings about the throat of a barbaric woman. But he could not remember the place. And again he floundered on towards the water-front, disquieted with vague and foolish thoughts, as much oppressed by the orderly streets as though he were escaping from some sea-worn harbour slum of vice and outlawry. He still wanted his cabin, as a long-harried chipmunk wants its tree-hole.

He was well out of it, he told himself reassuringly, though he still kept wondering why the woman had stopped him. He remembered details of her dress, the sense of assurance and well-being in her mere figure poise, the open way in which her eyes had met his. He began to wonder why he had lacked the audacity to respond to that clear challenge of fate. He demanded of himself why he had run away from the very thing he had been seeking.

He knew, as the growl of the ferry-whistles grew louder, that he was nearing the river. He felt as ungainly as a tortoise scuffling back to its water-edge of escape, but his confidence began to return to him as he found himself nearer and nearer his brink of delivery. He could perceive the ridiculous figure he had cut. He could even realise that he had defeated his own ends. He was conscious of a growing overtone of discontent, a peevish resentment against his own white-livered irresolution. And he would go aboard, and the next day be out at sea, with the mystery of it all still unanswered.

He strode on through the fog. It was not until he came to a narrow street-crossing between two blank-windowed warehouses that he saw his way obstructed. But he noticed, as he came to a sudden stop, that his path was barred by a cab with an open door. It blocked the crossing, very much as a Neapolitan *corricolo* manœuvres for a fare by cutting across a pedestrian's path.

The youth drew up and peered in through that door, with a slightly quickened pulse, wondering why the impassive figure on the box should be thus blocking his way.

Then he saw that the cab was not empty. Leaning quietly forward from the seat was

an intent and waiting figure—a woman's figure. It was the woman from whom he had so ignominiously fled.

He felt, this time, no horripilating tingle of shock. His fund of wonder seemed to be exhausted. He stood staring at her, almost abstractedly, with the mild and resigned bewilderment of a man who has seen lightning strike twice in the same spot.

“Quick!” said the woman, with an almost imperious movement of her gloved hand.

“What?” asked Lingg, inadequately, irrelevantly.

“I wanted to warn you,” the woman whispered, as she moved back on the cab seat, obviously to make room for him. “I *must* warn you—but not here.”

“Of what?” asked Lingg. He saw that she was quite alone in the cab.

“Come!” she commanded, ignoring his question.

He stepped into the hooded gloom like a coerced schoolboy. He was not afraid, he assured himself. It was merely that he was unwilling to be made the blind tool of forces he could not comprehend.

“Of what?” he repeated, noticing that the cab moved forward the moment the door had slammed shut.

“Not to sail on the *Laminian*,” said the woman at his side. He could detect a subtle perfume about her presence, a flowery and effeminising perfume which made him think of New England village gardens. An older man would have thought of boudoirs.

“Why not?” he asked. The woman could see that he was not as impressed as he might be.

“It will not be safe.”

“It never is, on those third-class boats.”

He insisted on being literal or nothing.

“But there are dangers ahead of you—dangers you don’t and can’t understand.”

“I don’t see how I can help that,” said the youth of little imagination. “When the Company puts me on a ship or gives me a station anywhere, I’ve got to stick to it.”

“Then you don’t believe me?”

“It’s not a matter of believing. It’s more a matter of not understanding you.”

A change seemed to creep over her, a lightening and relaxing change, such as would come to the New England garden he had thought of when it passed from shadow to sunlight.

“Would you like to understand me?” she asked, turning her eyes full on his somewhat abashed young face. He blushed and tingled under the directness of her gaze.

“How could I?” he succeeded in stammering out.

“Won’t you stay and try?” she murmured, pregnantly.

The prospect did not exactly appal him. It merely puzzled him now as something beyond the reach of his delimited imagination. The curl hadn’t been taken out of Romance, after all, he told himself. He could see the brooding spirit of her, incarnate before his very eyes, coifed and gowned like a goddess. But the very radiance of the vision made him doubly afraid of her.

“I’m afraid I’ll have to get back,” was his hesitating rejoinder.

“Back where?”

“To my ship,” he faltered.

“But you *mustn’t!*” she murmured, with a solicitous hand on his still tingling arm.

“I’ve got to get back,” he persisted, reaching and fumbling for the door.

“But not yet—not here,” she begged him.

“I *must*,” he declared, trying to stand on his feet under the cramping cab-hood, and tugging at the door-handle.

“Only listen to me for a moment,” the woman was saying, almost pleadingly.

He allowed her to draw him gently back into

the seat beside her. But disquiet had again taken possession of him.

“Am I so terrible?” she asked, with her hand still on his arm. Her voice was low and quiet; her half-smiling lips were parted a little, giving a touch of languid abandon to her otherwise intent and earnest face. And here was the very thing he had been so restlessly in search of; but now that it was before him, within his grasp, he was wordlessly afraid of it.

“N—no, you’re not terrible,” he jerkily reassured her, as though the words had to be paid out like links of a rusted cable.

“You’re not afraid of me?” she inquired, with a disarming soft intimacy of tone that sent the blood once more rioting through his veins. He did not answer. He merely gazed at her in inarticulate and tingling wonder.

“You’re not, are you?” she persisted, stooping forward and turning her body about in the cab seat so that her face was directly before him, within a foot of his own.

“No,” he managed to say.

He noticed that she almost closed her eyes.

“Then kiss me,” he heard her low voice murmuring, with her parted red lips lifting and creeping audaciously up to his, her hand already on his shoulder.

He drew back, white and stunned. It was

beyond reason. It was so beyond reason that it brought a hundred unkenneled suspicions yelping and snapping about him. Things that once seemed accidental and trivial took on a new significance. He could carpenter inconsequentialities into dim and towering structures of intrigue. He was afraid of himself and his surroundings.

The woman must have seen this the very moment she locked her arms about his reluctant neck, for her face changed and hardened. Even before he saw that change, though, he was crowding and struggling and pulling away from her.

The entire situation was so unlooked-for, so startling, that no new turn of it could add to his sense of surprise. He was conscious of the fact that she was crying out, while she still clung to him, and that the cab had come to a sudden stop. He noticed a figure at the door and a man's huge hand dart in towards him as it swung open. And still again he heard her shriek of simulated fear. It might even have been anger—he was not sure; he could not fathom it all. But he felt, dimly, that he was being tricked into something beyond his understanding; that the whole thing was some sort of trap. He resented being clawed at; he resented the way in which the man at the cab door was dragging and pulling him

to the street. There was no longer any doubt as to that intruder's immediate intention.

The wireless operator's one passion was to escape, to fight his way back to freedom. He remembered his ship and his waiting station, and how Heilig, the engineer, would have the laugh on him.

He was fighting like a terrier by this time, striking out blindly, in a frenzy of sheer panic. He was stung by the injustice of it all, and kept calling and shouting for help as he fought, fortified by the memory that his hands were clean, that he had done nothing amiss.

He was dazed and bruised, but he still fought and shouted, imagining it was his opponent's mad intention to kill him. He saw the shifting figures of men appear through the fog, and stand about in a circle, impassively watching his struggles. But still he fought and shouted.

His cries brought a patrolman with a night-stick in his hand. He could see the circle disrupted and scattered. He could hear the relieving sound of the falling club on the body of the brute above him, and sharp oaths and grunts, and then cries and counter-cries.

Then a fourth figure pushed peremptorily in through the re-formed circle of onlookers, a figure not in uniform, but quick-acting and authoritative. This newcomer seemed to pull the

entangled and struggling trio apart in one breath, as a child separates a puzzle-picture. He flung back the clubbing patrolman. He swept aside the still fighting second figure. He dragged the fallen operator to his feet, with a sharp question or two at the other man, who was blowing his nose on a handkerchief maculated with blood. Then he called out to the waiting cab-driver: "To the police station, straight!" and all but carried the dazed operator back into the waiting carriage.

He turned at the step, before following the operator into that cab, and spoke a crisp word or two to the still blinking patrolman. Then he lurched angrily and impatiently into the cab and slammed the door shut as they went clattering and swinging away through the heavy fog.

He left the patrolman gazing after him through the gloom, his idle night-stick dangling from his wrist like a bird's broken wing.

"Can you beat it!" gasped the astounded officer to the other man busy prodding and feeling his own body, very much as a housewife might explore a market-fowl.

"*You'd* beat it, all right!" retorted the other, disgustedly, with seismic-like rumblings of the chest. "You hare-brained bulls'd beat anything!"

“But what’s this all about, anyway?” demanded the bewildered officer, shouldering out through the crowd with the other man at his heels.

“God only knows,” was that other man’s retort, morosely brushing his battered hat with the palm of his hand.

“But who *is* he?”

“Who’s who?”

“The guy who flashed that Central Office shield.”

“One o’ Wilkie’s men.”

“Wilkie?”

“Chief Wilkie, of the Washington Bureau; and we’ve made a nice mess o’ this little coup o’ his between us!”

“Then where’s the rib figurin’ in it?” asked the still perplexed officer.

“The rib?”

“The woman with the Fifth Avenue make-up.”

“Oh, that’s Cherry Purcelle—she’s the come-on for the Washington Bureau people.”

“Bureau—what Bureau?” asked the officer, still in the dark.

“The Secret Service Bureau, you pin-head!” The man speaking had just discovered a rib abrasion that made him wince with pain.

“Then why t’ell didn’t you put me wise? I

might've fanned the bean-boxes off some o' you folks!"'

"You make me sick!" said the disgusted one, still preoccupiedly feeling about a bruised shoulder. "What d'you suppose it's called Secret Service for, if you've got to advertise it on every street-corner?"'

The officer was slow to comprehend the situation.

"But I thought Wilkie only muckraked round after counterfeiter."

"He does any old thing his Uncle Sam sets him at."

"Then what're they holdin' up that quiet-lookin' young feller for? What're they runnin' him in for, anyway?"'

"Mebbe they don't want him to sail to-morrow."

"But why shouldn't he sail to-morrow? Has he *done* anything?"'

"Oh, cut it out!—cut it out! and get me to the nearest drugstore. I hate dirty work like this!"'

"Then why're you doin' it?"'

The other man did not answer, and the question was repeated.

"War's war!" was all he said. And he emitted the laconism as though he had no love for the subject from which it sprang.

"You may as well put me wise," suggested the still waiting officer.

"I said this was *Secret Service*, didn't I?" grunted the other. "Where'd you say that drug-store was?"

CHAPTER II

THE SPARK IN THE GAP

“ARE you the operator?” asked a passenger in a black rain-coat, blocking the doorway of the *Laminian*’s wireless-room.

The fog of the night before had given way to a driving rain, like a sulky woman who finally and openly surrenders to tears. New York lay behind the *Laminian* and her passengers, seeming, under the soft torrent of those tears, a many-towered city of loaf-sugar which dissolved lower and lower into the flat line of the horizon.

The stranger in the doorway repeated his question.

“I’m *going* to be,” came the answer from the coatless figure bent over its mystic apparatus. He had not so much as turned to face his interlocutor.

“Mean it’s your first run?” inquired the huge and genial spirit of the doorway. This question, like his first, remained unanswered. So he repeated it in a tone of mild and attained humility.

"I can't be an operator until I've got something to operate on," said the voice from the room. Its barbed curtness of tone no more reached the quick of the newcomer than water could reach a duck's breast.

"Then you're not sending yet?" he amiably persisted, with his shoulder against the door-post.

"Not till I've tuned up this pile of *junk!*" was the preoccupied answer of the operator, bent low over his work.

"You don't mean she's off her trolley, our first hour out?" asked the other. His patience seemed infinite. He still stood there, studying the shirt-sleeved figure in the centre of the room.

"I can't make her spark right. And I've got a damp helix and a motor running weak!"

The words were followed by a gasp of exasperation and the rattle of a tool flung to the floor.

The huge-shouldered man in the raincoat made no effort to conceal his disappointment. It was what one deserved, he conceded, for travelling in such a punk-riveted, slush-pitted, coal-eating second-rater!

But he remained up on the bridge-deck. He continued to lean nonchalantly against the dripping rail, peering out from under bushy iron-grey eyebrows drawn close to the flat-bridged

nose, unmindful of the rain that beat in from the northeast as the *Laminian* plowed her way down through the Narrows and the Lower Bay. His red-rimmed, many-wrinkled eyes were still on the horizon, and his massive, russet hand was still clamped on the white awning-stanchion as Sandy Hook was passed and Atlantic Highlands melted down into a vague monotone of rain-swept loneliness.

Beyond the ship's officers, who fretted uncertainly back and forth along the bridge, his figure was the only one on the deserted deck. As the mist shut off the last dull line of Navesink, and the nose of the steamer swung southward, rising and dipping in the long ground-swell of the open Atlantic, the watching man gave vent to an involuntary sigh of relief.

But he still stood there, in the slanting rain, while the deck beneath his feet shook with the purposeful throb of the engines under their "full steam ahead," and the pulsating and ponderous thing of steel, "carrying a bone in her teeth," shouldered her way on through a ghost-like world of sea and rain. She seemed, for all her pitted and rust-stained plates, dignified with some new-found sense of mystery, of austere and unknown missions, as she sought out her predestined path through the grey loneliness of her universe. She seemed humanised, endowed

with the will of a sentient and reasoning being.

The stranger looked about quickly, as the thick-necked, short-legged captain, in dripping oilskins, leaned over the port bridge-gate and called back along the empty deck:

“You, there!—are you gettin’ anything?”

There was no answer to his call.

“Aren’t you gettin’ that ship out there?” he demanded peremptorily, as he flung the rain-drops from his cap-brim with a bull-like shake of the head.

He leaned on the wet rail and waited. But still there was no answer to his question. So he repeated it, this time in a bellow. Then came the sound of a chair being pushed back on deck-boards in the wireless-room, and the rattle of a quickly opened shutter.

“I’ll have her in five minutes,” answered the operator. The shutter closed again, sharply. Captain Yandel, the master of the *Laminian*, mumbled under his breath, and turned back to the bridge.

The man in the raincoat swung casually about on his heel and studied the operator’s station, where the after-deck superstructure rose squat and square as a scow-cabin out of the bleached flooring of the weather-deck. He peered up to where the “T” aerials of phosphor-bronze wire on their ashwood stretchers bridged the two

mastheads; he followed the course of those united wires as they led down into the square little station.

Next to this station, on the right, was the ship's lamp-room. In front of it stood the flag-locker. Farther along the deck, he noted, came the chart-room, and then the captain's cabin. In front of that again was the wheel-house and the canvas-strapped bridge.

On this bridge an officer, unsheathing a glass, was peering out to sea. The stranger followed the direction of the pointed glass and made out the ponderously rocking mass of a battleship as she crept up on them through the mist. There was something ominous and authoritative about her, with her sullen turrets and her monotone of colour, as she belched out her black smoke-plumes that hung low on the sky-line.

Then the stranger in the dripping raincoat swung sharply about and looked up at the mast-head. As he did so he saw a nervous blue spark appear and disappear at the ends of the taut-strung aerials that cradled back and forth with every dip and plunge of the ship. A muffled crash and clatter of sound echoed out of the closed station; a simultaneous kiss and crackle of broken noise came from the masthead.

It was the wireless operator at last working his key. It was the Hertzian waves, erupting

from the mended coils, winging their way with the speed of light out through the loneliness of the rain-fogged afternoon.

Then came a space of silence, interrupted by the sudden appearance of the operator, still in his shirt-sleeves, with his coat held over his head like a hood. He strode forward to the bridge-gate, where he was met by the waiting captain. Together they bent over a sheet from a tinted form-pad. Then the hooded figure hurried back to the station, and the slam of a door punctuated his disappearance from sight.

The man in the raincoat turned back to the battleship, and stood thoughtfully regarding the bursts of foam on her plunging cutwater and the intermittent shower of spray as she rose and dipped in the cross-swell. Through the engine-room skylight behind him came the call of subterranean voices, the busy clangour of iron scraping on iron, the quick slam of furnace doors, magnified in the open shaft-head to sounds of titanic proportions. As he stood there a deck steward mounted the brass-plated stairway, carrying a tray with coffee-cake and steaming cups of tea.

The man at the rail wheeled about quickly at the unexpected sound of a voice so close behind him. He declined the proffered refreshment brusly and swung back to his earlier position,

staring out at the battleship. The steward took up his tray and passed on to the operator's door, where, adroitly balancing on one foot, he tapped on the panel with the other.

The door opened, and this time the white glare of the electric light shone along the wet deck. The man at the rail, twisting his head, without any betraying movement of the body, succeeded in getting a more satisfactory glimpse of the room.

Behind the door swung a curtain of soiled denim, partly withdrawn. Squatting on a canvas camp-chair before his unpainted work-table was the operator. His wireless helmet-receiver, or "set," was clasped over his ears and held close to the bent head by a chaplet of glimmering metal. Against each "receiver" the operator pressed a white handkerchief, to shut away outside noises.

His face was lean, clear-cut, touched with vigour. It was too vital and youthful in texture to be called leathery, though it was sunburnt to what seemed almost a coffee-colour, contrasting strangely with the ruddiness of the open-weathered ship's officers about him. He had, too, a touch of the ascetic in the high brow and the wide cheek-bones, his leanness of jowl giving one the impression of generous reservoirs of energy greedily and continually drained by

some ever-adventuring thirst for activity. Though his eyes were impersonally studious and abstracted, there was a redeeming line or two of humour about the mouth. His hands were long and bony and slender, with something persistently scholar-like about them, for all their scarred and calloused and sinewed strength. This impression was further borne out by the restless, uncoördinated, and at times, almost wolf-like restlessness of the spare and nervous body as he passed back and forth in the narrow cabin. There seemed something unsubjugated in his long strides, as though he and his great length of limb had not yet grown used to confined places. This sense of an achieved repression was strengthened by the touch of audacity about the wide and clear-seeing eyes as he circled his room or sat sprawlily before his instruments—of an audacity tempered with intelligence.

He nodded cheerfully enough to the steward, however, at the sight of the coffee-cake and the steaming tea. Then he turned back to his responder. The steward, leaving his tea and cake on the seat of a broken-armed steamer-chair, went on his way, and the deck was again deserted.

“Why aren’t you getting the *Princeton*, there?” Captain Yandel once more demanded

from the bridge-gate. It was plain to see his feeling for the new operator was not an over-kindly one.

The new operator showed his head round one corner of the stateroom.

“I’ll try again!”

Once more came the hiss and rattle and crackle of the spark, and once more the lean and sun-tanned face appeared round a corner of the stateroom.

“He’s busy talking to the navy-yard!”

“To what?”

“To the navy-yard.”

“What’d he tell you?”

The new operator hesitated for a moment or two before answering. His singularly quiet eyes were resting on Captain Yandel’s nose, for it was a remarkable nose, something between a cardinal and magenta colour, stippled with the brighter hues of countless little broken veins.

“He told me to shut up, and cut out!” he answered at last, editing the irate officer’s blasphemy out of the message.

The passenger in the raincoat fell to pacing the open deck. He stopped once or twice, quite casually, to glance in at the wireless apparatus. Then, seeing that the operator had taken off his ear-phones and was leaning back in his canvas chair, giving his open and undivided attention

to the tea and coffee-cake, the stranger came to a stop and leaned companionably against the jamb of the open door.

The young man glanced up at the huge figure darkening his cabin. He did so with no outward sign of emotion. He had, apparently, become inured to the wondering eyes of the passengers, and he had his own ends to pursue. So he went on with his coffee-cake in silence.

“Could you take those messages of mine now?” asked the man in the raincoat.

“Any old time now,” answered the operator, without so much as a second glance.

“I settle for it with you, don’t I?” asked the stranger, drawing out a roll of bills. The formidable dimensions of that roll were lost on the man bending over the teacup.

“Leave your name and cabin number, and pay the purser. They don’t seem to trust operators on this floating palace! All I do is stamp the time-check on the message and send it out.”

He took the two messages, stamped them, and read them aloud, before pencilling the number of words on a corner of each sheet and stabbing it on his “send” hook. He read, perfunctorily:

VARREL, Sixty Wall Street, New York.

Our man on board *Laminian* bound Puerto Loconbia. Wire Washington. Will have him held by authorities to await instructions.

DUFFY.

The second message he read off quite as hastily, and with equal nonchalance:

DOCTOR BERNADO MORALES, Mobile.

Advise Charleston wireless to relay *Laminian* southward bound if shipment of laundry equipment and steel ties left Mobile for Ganley and date of sailing. MICHAEL DUFFY.

The stranger waited a moment at the door, as though expecting some further word or movement from the operator.

But the man of the key was already busy over his "tuner." So the stranger in the raincoat turned away, with a look of mild exasperation in his predaceous and puzzled little eyes.

CHAPTER III

THE CALL FROM WITHOUT

IT was four hours later that the man in the raincoat reappeared on the bridge deck. The night was thick, and McKinnon, the operator, worked with his coat off and his door hooked back against the wall-plates.

He looked up for only a moment as he saw the huge figure once more confronting him. The stranger, unrebuffed by his silence, stepped calmly inside.

“Anything come in over this machinery o’ yours for me?” he inquired as he took out a cigar, pushed his hat back on his head, and struck a light. The operator looked up with his habitually abstracted and unseeing stare.

“What’s the name?” he asked, once more studying his “tuner.”

The other was indignantly silent for a moment; then he laughed a little, forgivingly. “Duffy,” he answered. “Michael Duffy.”

The operator shook his head; the movement

was followed by another minute or two of silence.

“It might’ve come under the name of Cody, Richard Cody,” explained the intruder. Something in the younger man’s smile caused him to add: “You see, that’s our firm name, Duffy & Cody.”

An alias, south of the twentieth parallel, often enough carries its own explanation. The *Laminian*’s bow was pointing towards a land of patriots where a change of name only too often synchronised with a change of continents. But McKinnon merely gave a shake of the head. It was several minutes before he glanced about at the other man, with a closeness of scrutiny that might have been impertinent had it seemed less frankly impersonal.

“There’s nothing in for passengers this trip,” he announced as he turned back to his “tuner.” He drummed impatiently on the table-edge for a moment before readjusting his helmet-receiver. But the huge-shouldered intruder was not to be so easily shaken off.

“Your machine’s working, isn’t it?” he asked, preoccupied with an inspection of the end of his cigar. This cigar was soft and thick and short, like his own fingers. Despite its dark and baleful colour, he kept inhaling and expelling great lungsful of it as he talked. The

operator idly registered the mental decision that cigars such as those were surely of Hondurian make.

“I saw you giving a message to the captain, didn’t I?” And again the bellows-like lungs expelled their languid cloud.

“That was not to take on coffee at Puerto Locombia!” answered McKinnon. He delivered himself of this information casually, almost with amusement, though his half-averted eyes were not unconscious of the effect produced by what he had said.

The stranger was suddenly offering him one of the thick, short cigars. A shadow seemed to have lifted from his face.

“I don’t smoke,” said the ungracious man at the key, seeming to draw back into his shell of reticence. “And I’m busy sending.”

“You mean you’re actually talking to New York now?” amiably persisted the other. The operator’s hand went out to the switch, black against the unpainted boards, and flanked on either side by a fuse.

“I’ve been tuning for Atlantic City. We’re just picking him up,” he answered as his fingers hovered over the starting-box lever, clamped to the same pine boards, above the switch. A sudden deep buzzing filled the cabin. It grew louder and louder as the lever crossed

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farther and farther down on the contact-pins. It sounded like a hive of bees stirred into anger. The stranger peered in at the dynamo under the operating table.

“So you’re talking!” he murmured meditatively, appreciatively.

“How long will you be in communication with them?” he went on after a second or two of thought.

The other raised an earphone to listen, as the question was repeated. Then he turned back and bent over the carborundum tip between his responder-points.

“We’re never really out of touch with ‘em, on this run,” he retorted. He seemed to resent his own increasing concessions to the other’s imperturbable good-nature.

“You mean you can call up New York from the Caribbean?”

The operator put down his earphones and shook out his small cardboard box of carborundum fragments, picking through them for a fresh piece for his responder-points. It seemed apparent enough, to the patient-eyed man across the cabin from him, that he was neither friendly nor unfriendly; it was simply that he was busy.

“No, I don’t mean that, exactly. New York never works south of Atlantic City, as a rule. He’s got too much to handle there, too many

ships going in and out. But New York can relay to Galilee and then down to NF—that's Norfolk—and from there on to Hatteras. Then Hatteras could throw a message over to Charleston, and if we're depending on land stations alone, Charleston can relay to Savannah, and then Savannah can get in touch with the naval station at Saint Augustine."

"And then where?" asked the stranger, leaning back against the cabin wall.

"Then Key West could catch it up, and if there wasn't a gunboat or an Atlas fruit liner crawling somewhere around Cuba, why, the navy yard at Guantanamo could get it relayed over to Limon, and from Limon, in decent weather, you'd catch the navy yard operator at Colon. And if the night was clear, you'd run one chance in a hundred of waking up the Cocoanut Trail aerials behind Puerto Locombia."

There was a moment or two of silence.

"Could Puerto Locombia get anything outside of a passing ship? Kingston, for instance?"

"Kingston never had wireless—it's prohibited by the British Government."

"Then there's New Orleans, on a pinch."

"There's too much map between," explained the operator. He gathered up his box of scattered carborundum.

"Queer, isn't it, getting words on a tape that way, four hundred miles off?" said the stranger. He scratched his huge head in a sort of mute astonishment, as he surveyed the cabinful of apparatus.

"We don't use a tape," the other corrected, waving a preoccupied hand toward the inscription on the condenser case. "We're De Forest! And we don't claim to talk around the world yet."

The stranger was peering contentedly and aimlessly about the crowded little cabin. "Where the devil d'you suppose that cruiser was off to?" he next inquired.

"That's what *I've* been trying to find out."

"They all carry wireless?" asked the other as he sent an exhalation of pungent cigar smoke ceilingward.

"Yes; but they're not aching to talk just yet. Wait till they've been lying down there in the heat for three months. They'll be calling all night, just for the sake of seeing something doing with a coherer again. They'll kai-tow to a coal-tug, just to pick up a scrap of outside news."

The stranger, who seemed well satisfied with what he had learned, remained silent for a moment or two.

“By the way, could you take a message for New Orleans to-night?”

“I could take it all right, if you’re willing to prepay land charges.”

“I’ll pay anything you say, so long as you get me in touch with my people there. I want to ask Jean Careche, at the St. Charles, just when a shipment of oil and mill shafting got out of that port.”

“Wait a minute, then, until I get Atlantic City again. You can be writing out your message and I’ll get the time-check on it.”

McKinnon bent over his table, with a wrinkled brow, and started to “call.” As he caught the lever-handle of the huge key in his fingers and worked it deliberately, yet slowly, up and down—he was sending “strong”—the sudden blue splash of flame exploded and leaped and hissed across the spark-gap, from one brass-knobbed discharging-rod to the other. It filled the roughly improvised station with a sound like the rattle of musketry. The ceiling and walls of the room, crusted with many paintings of white lead, mirrored and refracted the purplish-blue flashes. A faint ozonic odour, not unlike a subliminated smell of brimstone, filled the air.

The operator threw off his switch again and listened intently, with his two handkerchiefs

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muffling his earphones. Then he suddenly swung about and looked at the man behind him.

"That cruiser's going to Culebra, off Porto Rico. She's ordered south on account of the Locombian trouble."

"You don't mean she's going to mix up in that mess?" the intruder cried with a note of disgust.

"No; Atlantic City says she's just going to lie there and wait for instructions from Washington."

The operator turned back to his table without apparently noticing the interest in the other man's eyes. He sat seemingly detached and unconscious of any presence in the room except that of the mysterious spirit which came and went at a touch of his hand. A smile began to play about his mouth as he listened. It was held there in suspension, while his gaze shifted from side to side, vivaciously, in response to that far-off and mysterious voice that was winging its invisible way across so many miles of rain-washed sea and emptiness, to creep along a slender thread of metal into his closed and crowded cabin.

He still seemed unconscious of the mounting look of determination, of obdurate belligerency, that smouldered up into the square-jawed face of the watching stranger as his eyes travelled

from a wall map of the Caribbean down to the brass key, and then back to the map again.

“You’d think our Uncle Samuel had enough troubles without trying to play school-teacher to those dinky little fire-eaters down there,” he meditatively ventured as he took out another of his black Hondurian cigars, and once more fell to studying the map of the Caribbean.

The operator, bent low over his apparatus, did not deign to answer him.

CHAPTER IV

THE MAN ON BOARD

“YOU’VE made this trip before?” observed the stranger, studying the man before him with the same calm and half-closed eyes that he had bent on the faded wall-map. He seemed as strangely disturbed by his companion’s note of quiet authority as he was by his incongruously sunburnt face and his unseemly length of limb.

“Never on *this* tub!” McKinnon responded, with a contemptuous side glance about his station.

The stranger followed that glance as it circled the crowded and disordered room. It was both a sleeping-cabin and an operating office. Under the wide shelf that supported a double row of Leyden jars, surmounted in turn by the De Forest helix, was the operator’s narrow berth. Toward the foot of this berth, below the condenser, stood an enameled washbowl and a litter of tools. Next to these was a wooden-slatted trunk, on which lay a clutter of recently unpacked

clothing, a pair of canvas-covered dumbbells, a shaving set, and a tin box of photographs. Against the farther wall, half way to the door, and directly in front of the dynamo, stood a broken steamer chair. In front of it was the rough pine table at which the operator sat and worked. On this table stood the tuning-box, with its mysterious rows of numerals along the three slots in which lever-heads moved back and forth, the great, long-handled despatching instrument, like a Brobdingnagian model of a telegraph key, and the delicately mounted little responder, the nerve center of the wireless system. Above this, on the outside wall, stood the switchboard. It was of unpainted pine, like the table. Set in it, near the top, was the starting-box, with its broken and roughly spliced lever, and below it the switch-arm itself, standing between its two protecting fuses. At the end of the table was the faded wall-map of the Caribbean and a shallow clothes-locker. Above this was tacked a lithograph of a stage dancer, pointing with a pink-satined toe to other and brighter worlds. It was a strange medley of the obvious and the inscrutable, of the commonplace and the mysterious.

“How’d you get aboard this tub, anyway?” the stranger suddenly asked, with a sympathetic wag of the head.

"I needed the money. But I never thought I'd have to face a mess like this." And the new operator disgustedly waved an arm about the room.

The stranger was meditatively rubbing his pendulous chin.

"You don't like the work, eh?"

"It's good enough when you've got a decent station. But *this* room isn't fit for a pig to live in! Look at that box of a sleeping-berth! It's worse than a coffin! And I'm going to kick a board out of that cabin wall if they don't get a ventilator tube in here—it's like sleeping in a dough-box! And look at that bunged-up tuner! And that operating-table, that's never seen a coat of paint; and that switchboard—nothing but raw pine! Why, nine of the connecters in those Leyden jars turned out to be broken, after I'd struck this place at noon. I had to patch them up with all the washbowl chains from the first cabins as we came down the bay. I got on to *that* dodge aboard the *Prinz Joachim*."

"She's a real boat!" interpolated the stranger.

The young operator was wistfully nodding his head. "They carry a German band, and an ice machine, and free beer for the officers."

"But you can make this snug enough," the other soothed.

"Snug! Why, this place looked like a box stall in a livery stable. I haven't even got a silence-room or an annunciator connecting me with the bridge—I've got to be hollered at like a sinker cook in an East Side beanery!"

The stranger laughed. It was altogether a laugh of sympathy. But his meditative eye kept roving about the stateroom.

"I suppose you've seen a good deal of the South?" he said at last.

"All I want to, thank you!" promptly answered McKinnon. The vigour of his retort made the other man smile again.

"You don't like it down there, eh?"

The operator, who had slowly adjusted his caplike receiving apparatus, performed his habitual rite of lifting the 'phone-receiver from his ear to catch the question as it was repeated.

"Do *you*?" demanded the operator.

The stranger did not answer the question. Instead of that he asked another.

"Why don't you keep out of it, then?" There was nothing, apparently, but off-handed good-nature in the query. The operator laughed.

"I can't afford to," was all he said, though he added in an afterthought: "Until I can get at the work I want."

McKinnon's questioner looked relieved. He

became more light-hearted, more suavely consolatory.

“But it’s so deucedly mysterious—sending all kinds of messages for all kinds of people,” he argued.

“What’s so mysterious about it?” the man at the table demanded. “I think it’s confoundedly simple.”

“The machinery is, I suppose, when you understand it; but I mean the mixing up in the big events, the getting next to life with the shell off.”

“Oh, it’s mostly weather reports and ‘sweet-heart’ messages and captains giving distances and saying they’re coming into port or passing lights or wanting wharf room, if it isn’t the Navy people asking for Sunday papers and news from home.”

“But think what a swath you could cut with wireless if you wanted to,” pursued the other in his placid disregard of all side issues.

“Me?” said McKinnon, turning slowly about.

“I mean as a side line,” interposed the stranger with a shrug. Still again McKinnon’s nervous grey eyes swept the figure in the steamer-chair.

“But I *have* a side line,” explained the operator as he noted the other man’s puzzled gaze resting on his box of models.

“How d’you mean?”

“I mean that reed-disk and Ruhmkorff coil transmitter you see there. *That’s* the work I want to get at.”

“But what is it?” was the other’s half-diffident inquiry. His lack of interest in no way seemed to depress the younger man.

“It’s my wireless telephony scheme for pilot-boats and fleet manœuvres and yacht races and ten-mile work in general. For instance, there’s a battle going on, and the whole top hamper of a cruiser gets blown away; all we’d have to do, with this, would be to run a wire up on an oar and call on the flagship for orders.”

“But aren’t other folks for getting in ahead of you on this?”

“Well, I can still use my outfit to smash their monopoly and stop royalty overcharges. You see, it’s only an arrangement of steel reeds connected with a receiver, or say to a responder like this one on the table. These reeds are tuned in unison with the transmitter-reeds—it works on what we call the law of syntonic synchronism.”

He noticed, as he went on, the other’s companionable grimace at the polysyllables.

“But this is all Greek to you,” he said, with a shoulder movement of humorous resignation.

“No, it ain’t,” protested the other. “Go on.”

"Models cost money, of course," McKinnon continued more deliberately. "I have to go slow. But once I get that apparatus where I want it you'll never see *me* south of Hatteras again."

He stopped, and waited for the other man to speak.

"It's not a white man's country," admitted the stranger with a nod toward the South. "The only good thing in it's the mules."

"We've got to take that as it comes," McKinnon said with an unlooked-for placidity of tone. Then he leaned back, with half-closed eyes, and linked his long forefingers together behind his head. "You see, I can always save money on a coastwise run like this: there's no way of getting rid of it."

"Well, money's worth having now and then," the stranger remarked as his sagely ruminative eye fell on the little varnished box that held the wireless responder.

He was silent for a moment or two, though McKinnon watched him closely out of his half-shut eyes. Then the stranger swung slowly about and touched the operator on his soiled shirt-sleeve. McKinnon felt the heavy forefinger on his arm, but he did not move.

"See here," said the stranger, and both his voice and his expression had undergone some

quick and pregnant change, "see here; d'you want to make ten times what you get out of this key-operating business? D'you want to make a good round sum, helping me out of a hole?"

The *Laminian's* operator looked closely at the man who had invaded his cabin. He had apparently been afraid of some such undercurrent of self-interest in the other's advances. He seemed to possess the man of thought's persistent horror of material and entangling alliances; he seemed to feel that some secret web of inveiglement had been woven about him.

"How could *I* help you out of a hole?" he curtly demanded.

The stranger did not answer at once. The other's suddenly aroused suspicion had warned him to go slow. Instead of speaking he leaned back in the steamer-chair and studied his companion. The path before him seemed a precarious one. His pursed-up lips worked slowly in and out as he sat there temporising. There was something suggestive of the ruminant in his large and heavy silence.

"Could we talk here—us two, man to man?" he finally asked, with a look at the door.

"Of course we can," the operator retorted, nettled by the sense of mystery the other was conjuring up about so simple a situation. This

vague feeling of irritation seemed to merge into something that was almost anger as he watched the stranger slowly rise to his feet and cross over to the cabin door, held back against the wall-plates by its brass hook. He lifted the end of this hook on his toe and let the freed door swing shut with the slow dip of the steamer's deck. Then he ruffled out the faded denim curtain and came back and sat down. The two men continued to look at each other guardedly.

"I've got a hard job ahead of me," began the intruder, seeming to feel his way as he went. "A hard job—and you're the only man on this ship who can help me along."

"Go on," McKinnon commanded with an impatient reach for his discarded coat.

"That's just it. I'll be hanged if I know how to go on!" the other explained. He gave vent to a guttural laugh of uneasiness and sat stroking his pendulous, turkey-cock throat.

The operator, drumming on his pine table-edge, waited in silence. The other man was also silent. The pulse and throb of the engines crept into the white-walled cabin.

"Well," said McKinnon with a significant glance toward his large and authoritative silver watch. The stranger's eye, following him, passed on to the key-lever and then on again to the helix wires.

"You may recall that you sent a couple of messages out for me this afternoon," he finally began.

McKinnon recalled the fact of the two despatches.

"Maybe you happen to remember the wording of those two particular messages?"

McKinnon, with wrinkled brow, turned to his "send-hook." He found the two sheets, and straightened them out on his knee. Then he looked up to say: "We never hold these things in our head, you know. We can't, any more than a wire can."

He let his gaze run over the sheets of paper before him. The other man sat watching him as he read. For just a moment, as he made note of what seemed the operator's half-forbearing, half-cynical indifference, a shadow of disappointment flitted across his face, typifying, apparently, some passing regret for a reconnaissance at last recognised as unnecessary. But he pulled himself together at once, as though determined to face the problem immediately before him.

"Would you mind reading that first despatch out to me?" he asked with the placid authority of a prestidigitateur sure of his trick.

McKinnon rattled through the message at a breath: "Varrel, sixty Wall Street, New York.

Our man on board *Laminian*, bound Puerto Lo-combia. Wire Washington. Will have him held by authorities to await instructions. DUFFY."

The operator put the message on the table and calmly weighted it with his carborundum box. The other man suddenly realised, as he made note of McKinnon's attitude of unmoved neutrality, how automatic the human mind can become; how, when once immersed in the method of doing a thing, it can lose all sense of the thing itself. The man of the key had seen nothing but a string of words to be "sent." It was only too apparent that their meaning had escaped him.

"I suppose I've got to explain that," said the stranger, fondling one of his thick, short cigars in his thick, short fingers. "You'll notice that this message went to 60 Wall Street. You may or may not know that that's the Information Bureau of the Consolidated Fruit Concern. And if you've knocked about the Banana Belt long enough you've found out that those people just about *own* those little yam-eating republics down there."

McKinnon nodded as a sign that he understood.

"They've got a good many millions of money locked up in that export business o' theirs. And

when you're doing business in a republic that's built on bullets you've got to watch where you're walking. It means that you've got to keep your ear to the ground; see that your governments are stable, I mean; and your marionettes in their nice little red and gold uniforms running smooth and true. That's why they retain a big man like Varrel for their information bureau—just to know who's poking a finger into the political pie down there, and to be ready for trouble when it blows up."

It was all obvious enough to the listening operator.

"Well, I'm here acting for Varrel and the Consolidated Fruit people. The Locombian *charge d'affaires* at Washington tipped our office off some five weeks ago about trouble ahead in Guariqui."

"Where's Guariqui?" quietly asked McKinnon.

"Guariqui's their capital—the capital of Locombia. Since we've heard that, of course, we've been co-operating with the department at Washington, keeping an eye on any Locombian likely to be interested in the Guariqui mix-up."

McKinnon confessed that he had known of detectives engaged in the sole pursuit of shadowing Latin-American exiles.

“And it’s right here under this deck”—Duffy tapped the floor with his heel as he spoke—“*it’s right here on this ship o’ yours that we’ve got Ganley—the one and only Ganley!*”

CHAPTER V

THE WEB OF INTRIGUE

THE stranger peered across the cabin at the unperturbed operator.

“Who’s Ganley?” asked McKinnon.

The man in the steamer-chair let his astonishment explode in a ceilingward belch of smoke.

“Ganley! Why, Ganley’s the biggest gun-runner doing business in the Caribbean!”

“Gun-runner?”

“Yes, the slickest revolution-maker that ever shipped carbines and smokeless into a Latin-American republic!”

“He’s new to me,” McKinnon protested.

“He’s the man who’s always smelling out a country that’s looking for a liberator. And he gets a rake-off from the patriots and a rake-off from the Birmingham gun people, and another rake-off from the nitro-makers. Why, he’s the man who’s been engineering this Locombian uprising for the last seven months! But now

we've got him good, and got him where we want him.”

“Then what's he doing on a steamer like this? Couldn't he see he was going to be cornered?”

The disposition of the operator was not altogether an inflammable one.

“That's just the point, my friend. He couldn't get out of Charleston or Mobile or New Orleans. We had those ports watched. So he slipped quietly up to New York, engaged a passage on Saturday's Hamburg-American steamer for Colon, and then slipped over to the *Laminian* in a closed cab when he thought we weren't keeping tab on him. But, pshaw! you know all this already, don't you?”

“Not all of it,” replied McKinnon.

“But you saw that yellow-skinned man who was helped aboard? The sick-looking fellow with the Spanish servant, who was almost carried up from that cab on the wharf?”

McKinnon confessed to some vague remembrance of the incident.

“That man is Ganley!” said the other. “And he's under this deck, down there in cabin fourteen, and you'll find that he's going to stay there until we slip into the roadstead at Puerto Locombia.”

A meditative silence filled the little white-walled cabin.

“But what have I got to do with all this?” McKinnon at last demanded. His face seemed to carry the complaint that he had always found dissension on shipboard hard to endure; it was never easy to get away from disturbances in a world so small, or to put hate behind one in a life so circumscribed. Yet he smiled a little, in spite of himself. A ship, he had somewhere heard, must be either a heaven or a hell. The next fortnight, he felt, would find little of the celestial about the *Laminian*.

“That’s just what I’m coming around to,” the intruder was saying to him. “This Ganley, remember, has got his ‘fences’ and confederates and small-fry helpers. He works the thing thorough when he does it. And as likely as not, between here and Puerto Locombia, he’s going to get messages sent in to him, or he’s going to send out some despatches on his own hook—so as to keep in touch with his people.”

The stranger came to a stop and sat regarding the younger man as though he looked for some word of encouragement or comprehension from him.

“The thing I’ve got to guard against most,” the stranger who called himself Duffy continued, “is the department at Washington. If

they sent something in, and it got out all over the ship, it would be likely to spoil everything."

"But it won't get out all over the ship," the operator corrected.

"You'll promise me that?" asked the other with a look of relief.

"Of course I'll promise you that—it's part of my business."

"But there's the other side of the question," the stranger discreetly continued. "Ganley is almost sure to be sending or receiving something. Why, I shouldn't be surprised if you've been handling something for him already."

The operator reached out for his message-hooks. The movement was merely perfunctory, for the hooks were all but empty.

"What name would he be travelling under?" McKinnon looked up to ask.

"He's booked as John Siebert, cabin fourteen," was the answer.

The man in the steamer-chair looked relieved, but only for a moment, when he learned that nothing had come or gone.

"Of course I may be wrong about his trying to keep in touch with those people of his. And it may happen the department won't even try to have him held. Perhaps they won't do anything until we get him ashore at Puerto Locombria. But we've got to get him there—it's our

last chance. We've worked too hard on this thing not to see it put through to a finish."

"And?" asked McKinnon, waiting.

"All I want you to do is to keep tab on anything that comes in for this man Ganley, or about him and his tin-horn warfare down there—and on anything that's to go out, until we land."

"Are you acting officially?" McKinnon demanded, with a studied effort towards impersonality. "I mean, are you acting for the department at Washington?"

"I'm acting as the confidential agent of the Consolidated Fruit people, and the Consolidated Fruit people have been co-operating with the department for several weeks now."

"And you simply want to know what these messages are?"

"Yes, that's all; I mean that's all, unless they're of such a nature as to defeat the ends of justice. We don't want anything to get through that's going to help our man slip away from us."

"You mean for me to hold back everything that looks suspicious until you O.K. it?"

"And couldn't you do that if I made it worth while for you?" quietly inquired the stranger.

"How do you mean worth while?"

"Why, I'll pay you for your trouble. I'll—"

But McKinnon's seemingly indignant start brought the older man to a stop.

"You don't suppose I'm going to take money to hold up the company's business?" he demanded.

The stranger raised a thick, red hand protestingly. McKinnon noticed a scar in the centre of the wide palm. He inappropriately wondered if it could be a bullet wound.

"Hold on a minute!" he warned the other, appealingly. "This isn't a matter o' messenger-boy tips. It's out and out business. You've got to remember they're big things involved in this, and big people, too."

"Why do you want to mix *me* up in the mess, whether it's big or little?" complained the operator. The other man permitted the protest to go unanswered.

"But can't you tell me what it's worth for you to co-operate with us in this?" he blandly insisted.

"It would be worth my job!" McKinnon cried. The other man, eyeing him closely, could not rid himself of the impression that the operator was acting a part, that he was feigning reluctance for some potentially better bargain yet to be driven.

“Well, what’s your job worth?” was the older man’s undisturbed query. In fact, there was an undertone of contempt in his guttural question.

“Oh, it’s not what the job’s worth,” protested McKinnon. “It’s the putting outside business before the business I’m paid to do. It’s the acting against regulations and getting the company officers down on me. It’s the doing of something I’m not here to do.”

“But this is merely a matter between us two, man to man. The company doesn’t have anything to do with this.”

“They own this junk,” broke out the operator, with a wave of the hand that designated the apparatus about him. “And they about own me, too, as long as I’m on their pay-roll.”

“Of course they do,” the other soothed tranquilly. “But you’re here, and they’re in New York, and you’ve got the running of this apparatus until we dock at Puerto Locombia.”

The operator sat looking at the other man in silence.

“Why, you told me yourself, a few minutes ago, that your machinery doesn’t always work right. And you say you haven’t a tape, or anything that registers the messages as they come to you. Isn’t that right?”

The operator nodded.

"Then why couldn't you accidentally miss a message? Or why couldn't you send it out without being sure that it was going to carry clear across to the next operator?"

McKinnon still looked at the other man. There was something so placid and intimate about the tones of the stranger's voice that the very purport of his suggestion had seemed robbed of its enormity.

"I wouldn't do a thing like that for five hundred dollars!" the operator at last declared.

The stranger looked back at him without a move of his great body in the steamer-chair. McKinnon's glance of open contempt in nowise disturbed him.

"I'll give you one thousand dollars if you do it!" he said. His voice was quiet and casual as he spoke, but again the operator swung about and peered at him. He opened his lips to reply, and then suddenly became silent. He shifted in his chair, as though to draw away from some tangible and precipitating temptation.

"I'll give you one thousand dollars," repeated the stranger, "and I'll promise to stand between you and any trouble you're afraid of."

"It's not what I'm afraid of," the other retorted.

"Then what is it? You fail to catch a message or two, and no one's the wiser. What of

that? Good heavens, man, you're not doing anything crooked! Nobody's cut a throat back there in New York! Nobody's trying to get away from your Centre Street people. You're not doing anything against the penal code."

"Why didn't you go to the captain about this?" complained the operator. The tacit note of concession in that complaint did not escape his companion.

"That low-brow!" he grunted in disgust.

"Being a low-brow, as you call him, ought to make him all the easier to handle," suggested McKinnon, with his short and puzzling laugh. "And he's still the master of the ship."

"The captain has no more to do with this than De Forest himself! And I imagine he'd rather be soaking in brandy pawnees than talking business to outsiders. This is something between us two. You're not cheating anybody. You're not hurting anybody. All you do is to help me win a big case, and get well paid for your trouble. And a twist of the wrist is what it costs you. For I'm assuming, of course, you can put that machinery of yours out of business for the time being without exactly showing how."

"That's easy enough," said the operator, with a stare at his apparatus. "There are a dozen ways of throwing a complicated thing like

that out of kilter. It's my getting out of kilter with the company that worries me."

"The company doesn't count, my friend. They're outsiders in this. And you get your thousand dollars in cold cash, to work on that reed-disk of yours for half a year, if you want to."

McKinnon laughed a little. Then he grew more thoughtful, and was about to speak, when the quick tread of feet sounded on the deck without. He caught up the 'phone "set" hurriedly and bent over the pine table. The steps passed on, but the betrayal of disingenuousness remained a consoling and obvious fact to the man in the steamer-chair. It left him no longer in doubt.

He reached down into his capacious trouser pocket and produced a roll of treasury notes, held together by a double rubber band. He peeled off three orange-tinted twenty-dollar bills and folded them neatly across the middle, lengthwise. Then, with equal deliberation, he thrust them into McKinnon's still hesitating fingers. The operator looked down at the money doubtfully and then up at the stranger.

"That's just a trio of twenties to bind the bargain," the latter explained. "You've got to get *something* for me taking up your time like this."

“But how are you going to clear me—I mean how are you going to make them see I haven’t been acting against the ship, if it ever comes to a showdown?” asked the operator, not so much with timidity, but more as though he took a morbid joy in toying with the dangers of the situation.

“There’ll be nothing to clear, and nothing to show,” the other retorted. “All you’ve got to do is to have a bad ear when a certain message or two happens along. But I’ll go further than that just to put your mind at rest. To-morrow, when I pay over the balance, I’ll put it down on paper, with my name to it, that I guarantee to protect you. We can both sign a note showing we’re acting straight and where we stand. Then you’ll have me tied down in black and white. That seems square enough, doesn’t it?”

“Oh, it’s square enough. But suppose this man Ganley comes to me with a message to send out. I’ve got to show it to you, and if you don’t approve of it I’ve got to act the lie that the message has been sent and keep lying to him every time he asks me about it.”

“You’re not paid to be a ‘fence’ for a gun-runner, are you?”

The older man laughed a little. Then he rose heavily to his feet. His head almost touched the cabin ceiling. “There’s not much danger.

he'll ever ask about it. And when you know the man and his business you'll never let things like that worry you."

"That doesn't excuse me—his being a gun-runner."

"Well, if you felt that way, of course, you could send the message. Only you might send it as I mentioned—with the risk of falling short, I mean; some time when the engine-room doesn't happen to be giving you quite enough power."

The operator weighed and pondered the question. The man beside him was anarchistic enough in his ideals of conduct. He recognised no authority beyond the dictates of expediency. He went back to primal and feral conditions—went back to them with the disquieting directness of a savage.

"I'd have to call until I got my station," temporised the operator, "and the other fellow's O.K. after he'd got my call. Then he'd signal 'Go ahead,' to show he was ready to receive, and if I failed to reach him he'd keep 'coming back' for me to repeat. Then, too, what I was trying to send might be picked up by any stray operator behind the skyline. On the other hand, if I let the message die, after getting my 'go-ahead' signal, the thing would be reported

and looked into. And that would mean trouble with the company when I got back."

"Then when you get your 'go-ahead' signal why couldn't you just lay low and complain that your receiver or coherer, or something, was out of order—that you were cut off from receiving?"

"I hate to lie about my machinery," retorted the operator with what seemed a blind and foolish pride in his tools.

The older man's curl of lip showed a slowly mounting dislike for further argument. Then he lifted his wide shoulders with a movement of resignation.

"Of course, I don't want you to lose either your job or your self-respect just because my official duty's been making me shadow a man."

The wireless operator seemed groping about for an answer when the quietness of the ship was broken by a sudden sound. It was the *Laminian's* foghorn, hoarse and mournful through the darkness, tearing the quiet with its slowly repeated call. The two men stood side by side, listening, as the bass-noted complaint was repeated.

"We're running into thick weather," said the operator, turning to take up his earphones. The two men, immured in their own ends and aims, had lost all thought of time and environment.

A moment later heavy footsteps sounded on the deck and the captain appeared in the doorway. He stood in the narrow opening, red-nosed, gnome-like, with the white light glistening on his waterproofed figure.

“Are you keeping an ear open for everything in there?” he demanded, with a scowl of disapproval at the man beside the steamer-chair.

“I’m listening for anything,” McKinnon answered, with the “set” over his head. The door shut again. McKinnon turned back to the littered pine table. The foghorn sounded and grew silent; the dynamo purred and buzzed as the starting-box lever crossed down on the contact-pins.

The stranger beside the steamer-chair buttoned his coat. Then he crossed the cabin and turned back to peer at the operator, bent low over his table as he called and listened, and called again.

“So I can count on you in this?” he asked in his quiet and reassuring guttural. His hand was already on the cabin door-knob.

“To the finish,” answered the other man pregnantly, replacing his earphones and holding them close to his head with his muffling handkerchiefs.

CHAPTER VI

THE SECOND VISITOR

McKINNON was oppressed by the thought that the hour was late and his body bone-tired. But he did not close communication with the *Royal Mail* operator who had "picked him up" through the fog until he had been duly warned of heavy weather southeast of Hatteras. Through the night came also the news that one of the *Royal Mail* passengers, an American consul from Aregua, had broken his thigh-bone against a bulkhead, and the *Laminian* was asked to relay the news to New York. This meant a call for ambulance and doctors to be at the landing-wharf, together with an order to have a hospital-room made ready.

So the key was kept busy again while the benevolent resources of science were being marshalled so many miles away. The *Laminian's* operator had bidden his far-off fellow worker a sleepy "good-night," and was still stooping absentedly over his tuning-box—which had not

adapted itself to the thick-weather work—when a knock sounded on his cabin door.

“Come in!” he said, lifting off his earphones with a little sigh of mingled weariness and resignation. He suspected that his undisclosed caller was a junior officer, much given to garrulity. He began to dread the thought of being kept out of bed for another hour or two.

The door opened slowly and the look of frank annoyance as slowly faded from the operator’s face, for standing there, confronting him, blinking in the strong glare of his electrics, was a young woman.

Her skirts, gathered up in one hand, and held high from the wet deck, showed in a sweeping cascade of white against the gloom behind them. On her head was a blue seagoing cap, swathed in a long, cream-coloured motor-veil. Behind her stood a stewardess, fat and untidy, carrying a cloak, with the outward and studious solicitude of a servile nature exalted by the consciousness of having been overtipped. She would have made an ideal figure, the operator felt, for the nurse of the Capulets.

McKinnon put down his ’phone and rose from his seat, still peering at the figure nearer him, the woman in the doorway. He looked at her closely, perhaps too closely, for he had not imagined any such woman aboard the *Laminian*.

He noticed that she was wearing a gown of dark-blue pilot-cloth, and that she was younger than he had at first supposed. One of her hands had been thrown out to the door-jamb to steady her against the roll and pitch of the deck. The clear oval of her face—and it seemed more the mature and thoughtful face of a woman than the timid and hesitating face of a girl—was shadowed and softened by a crowning mass of brown hair. Her teeth, as she ventured her sober yet oddly conciliating smile, impressed him as being very white and regular, vaguely hinting at a bodily strength which the softness of her eyes, at a first glance, seemed to contradict. Yet these deep-lashed eyes were alert and alive with the fires of intelligence, and set wide apart under the low and thoughtful brow. They carried an inalienable sense of wisdom in their almost austere steadiness of outlook, McKinnon felt, as the woman still stood in the doorway, puckering her face a little at the strong light. Yet what most impressed him was the sense of ebullient vigour, of intrepid and Aprilian vitality, which brooded about her. She was by no means Amazonian in stature—she was even smaller than he had at first suspected—but she gave him the impression of being youthfully and buoyantly full-blooded.

Then she stepped boldly in across the high

door-sill and held out a tinted form-pad sheet to the operator. The solicitously purring stewardess, at a gesture from her benefactor, had already disappeared.

“You are still sending, are you not?” asked the young woman, stepping still nearer the operating-table.

Her voice betrayed no trace of foreign origin, as McKinnon had at first expected it might. The speech was that of a well-groomed New York girl, the type of girl that McKinnon had so often noted about the Fifth Avenue shops and the theatre lobbies. The voice was the New York voice, yet with a difference. It was the slightest and thinnest substratum of accent, of modulation, that made up this difference. Yet in doing so it imparted to her words a mild and bewitching gentleness of tone that seemed to hint at some indefinably exotic influence of education or environment. It seemed to impart to her the crisp piquancy of the Parisian, persistently yet mysteriously accounting for her birdlike alertness of poise and movement, for some continuous suggestion of schoolgirl youthfulness that belied her actual years. It seemed to convert what he had at first accepted as audacity into fortitude touched with discretion.

“Then you *are* sending,” she said, as though in answer to her own question.

"I'm sorry," said McKinnon, backing away from the chair that she might take it if she chose. "I'm sorry, but I've just stopped for the night."

For the first time he was conscious of the fact that he had been at work in his shirt-sleeves, and that these sleeves were wofully soiled. He took down his coat and struggled into it. The young woman noticed the movement gratefully and sank into the chair he had abandoned for her.

"But can you not get somebody?" she asked. There was no note of pleading in her voice, but the mute appeal of her eyes as they rested on his made him suddenly change his mind.

"I've been having trouble with that tuner of mine," he explained. "It's rather hard for us to pick up anything on a thick night like this, you know. But I'll try."

She bent a little to one side as he leaned over the table and threw down the switch-lever. They were side by side, almost touching each other.

"Why is it hard?" she asked.

"It's not easy to explain without being technical, but wireless works 'heavy' in damp weather. You may have noticed it with telephones, even, on rainy days."

"Yes, I have," she said with a preoccupied nod, turning her gaze from the switch-lever to McKinnon's face.

He caught the key in his fingers and the blue spark once more leaped and exploded across the spark-gap. The girl watched him with intent eyes and slightly parted lips as he fitted the "set" to his head and listened with the 'phones pressed against his ears.

McKinnon was keenly conscious of her presence there so close beside him. There was something perversely and insidiously exhilarating in it. It made him forget the hour and the fact that he was bone-tired. The orderlylike stewardess fluttering about, he supposed, somewhere beyond the closed door, alone took the romance out of a visit so deliberately secret. He turned to his key again, and again called through the night. Then he adjusted his 'phones and listened. He finally put down his "set," with a shake of the head.

"I'm afraid we'll have to wait until morning," he said.

"I'm sorry," she answered, with her studious eyes on the dancing-girl lithograph above the faded wall-map.

"If you'll leave the message, I'll file it," McKinnon explained, to hide his resentment at the

half-derisive touch that had crept into her glance.

The woman handed him the message-form, with her intent eyes now on his.

“Must I pay now?” she asked.

“It will be charged against your stateroom; the purser will collect it before you land,” explained the operator as he jabbed the message on his send-hook with a businesslike sweep of the hand.

“But you will see that it’s sent?” she asked as she rose to her feet.

“It will be off before you’re up,” McKinnon answered, watching her as she drew the heavy folds of her veil close down over her face. She looked back, at the door, with a timidly audacious nod of the head. The next moment the door closed and she was gone.

McKinnon, still conscious of the subtle fragrance that filled the room, swung about to his table. He paused only a second to wonder a little at this faint but persistent perfume that seemed to have charged and changed the very atmosphere about him. Then he crossed the cabin and reached up and ripped a brightly coloured lithograph from the wall, bisecting the terpsichorean figure with one impatient tear of the paper.

He stood in the middle of the room for a moment or two without moving. Then he crossed to his table, reached out to the send-hook, and quickly unspeared the message.

He looked at it for several moments. Then he passed his hands over his tired eyes and re-read the words. They were addressed to Enrique Luis Carbo, Locombian Consulate, New Orleans, and they said:

Am on board *Laminian*, bound from New York to Puerto Loconbia. Advise necessary quarters. ALICIA BOYNTON.

McKinnon was still peering down at the message in his hand when he was startled by the sound of someone at his door. Even before he could restore the message to the hook his door was opened and as quickly closed again.

It was the girl who had just left him. He noticed that she held one hand on her breast and that she was panting. She leaned against the jamb for a minute or two, as though weak from fright.

“What is it?” the operator asked.

“Oh, it’s nothing,” she faltered, struggling bravely enough to regain her composure. Her answer was not altogether convincing.

“What has happened?” persisted the startled operator.

She moved away from the door, in a listening attitude.

"It was a man," she tried to explain, inadequately. "He frightened me."

"But what man?"

"A stranger—somebody outside."

"You mean that he dared to speak to you?"

There was a moment's silence.

"No," she answered in her low voice. "But it was the shock of seeing him so—so unexpectedly."

McKinnon stepped across the cabin and stood near her. His efforts to catch some clearer glimpse of the veiled face were fruitless. She reminded him of a ruffled bird.

"Won't you sit down until you feel better?"

"No, no! I must go! It's so late! I must go!"

But she still hesitated.

"Shall I take you to your cabin?" he ventured.

She showed actual alarm at this.

"Oh, no; that is out of the question. But if you will turn down your lights until I have slipped away——"

He snapped out the electrics. He could hear her in the darkness quietly opening the door. She stood there looking out for several moments. "Good-night," she whispered grate-

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fully as she slipped across the deck and was gone.

McKinnon stood looking after her, deep in thought.

CHAPTER VII

THE TANGLING SKEIN

IT was early the next morning that the *Laminian* ran into a coastwise gale that left her decks clear of passengers and her funnels white with salt. The intermittent crackle of "static" from the humming aerials kept obliterating the etheric "splash" of the *Laminian's* low-powered coils. The ship was left inarticulate and alone on her course. Beyond the erratic "sneeze" and "cough" of the atmospheric electricity there was no answering voice within McKinnon's sternly delimited radius of communication.

The weather disturbed McKinnon much less than did his own state of mind. The day, which was one of brain-fogging pitching and tossing about his cabin, left everything connected with the night before still in suspense. The ship seemed a deserted one. Captain Yandel and his officers sat alone before the "racks" of the musty-odoured tables, between musty-odoured

walls that outraged the nostrils like the effluvial dampness of a nighthawk's cab. No one ventured on deck.

McKinnon, during that enforced armistice, escaped a day of total inaction by packing away his belongings. That task accomplished, he overhauled his helix and drafted a casing for his dynamo. As the afternoon deepened into evening, and the wind fell, he coerced his attention on his Ruhmkorff-coil models. He was still studying over his reed-disk apparatus when an unexpected tap sounded on his door.

Even before he had time to answer, the door itself was opened. It was the girl in the pilot-cloth gown, his visitor of the night before. She looked back one intent moment, as though to make sure she was not being watched or followed. Then she quietly closed the door and as quietly slid the brass bolt that stood under the knob, locking herself in the cabin.

She smiled, a little nervously and yet spiritedly, as she caught sight of the other's concerned and puzzled face. Then her own face became quite sober. Again McKinnon was conscious of a faint perfume pervading the place. It seemed as finely feminine to him as the rustling of skirts. And again he was impressed by the ebullient sense of buoyancy, of youthful

vigour, which persisted about her, even in shadow, like a penumbra.

“Could I speak to you?” she asked, a little disturbed at the other’s continued silence. “I have something to explain,” she continued, “something in which you might help me.”

The flow of her English seemed as even and liquid as the flow of a river, yet there still remained that puzzling and piquant undercurrent of the exotic.

“You do not mind?” she asked, obviously puzzled by his continued aloofness. It was plain that she was not a woman who frequently asked favours of men.

“Of course I don’t mind! It’s only that a visit like this might be misconstrued——”

She shrugged her shoulders ambiguously and sank into the steamer-chair. McKinnon discreetly slid back the shutter of his cabin window. He took the further precaution of drawing the faded denim curtain. The woman watched the operation with her mild and meditative gaze still on the figure before her. Then she motioned for him to sit down. She noticed his eyes on the door, apparently in apprehension, and she smiled a little. Then she became serious again and peered studiously about the room.

“You could put me in there?” she suggested,

with a satiric motion towards the operator's closet-door.

McKinnon seemingly took her query in good faith, for he threw open the door and peered inside. His troubled look returned to him.

"There would scarcely be room," he explained. "It's so crowded and shallow, you see."

"It would be an adventure," she maintained, making due allowance for his lack of humour. He could see that she was wringing some inap-posite amusement out of the situation. It threw him on his guard for a moment, but only for a moment. The open candour of her glance dis-armed his abashed suspicion.

He agreed with her that it would indeed be an adventure. He even laughed at the thought of it, infected a little by her spirit of quiet audacity. Yet, in spite of himself, as he let his eyes rest on hers, there remained with him the stubborn yet vague impression that her pres-ence there was the preamble for some deeper and undivulged purpose. The seconds lengthened themselves into a minute, and still neither spoke. They were still gazing at each other when the sound of a quick step on the deck without fell on their ears.

The woman stood up with a little gasp. The look on her face changed into one of appeal. Mc-

Kinnon, impressed with her fear, also rose to his feet. They could hear the locked cabin door being impatiently shaken.

“What shall I do?” whispered the woman. The operator pointed towards his clothes-closet. It was the only resource. He motioned for her to step into it as he himself crossed the cabin towards the outer door, on which someone was now openly and impatiently knocking.

There was a fleeting rustle of drapery, a warning pressure of one slender finger against the woman’s lips, and a moment later she had disappeared into her place of hiding and had swung back the door. McKinnon, as soon as he saw she was safe, withdrew his bolt. In the frame of light stood the great, wide-shouldered figure of Duffy. He waited there, without advancing, for several seconds. McKinnon could see his slowly roving eye as it took in each detail of the stateroom. He betrayed no surprise and no curiosity, but across his face flitted a veiled look of apprehension.

“Are you alone?” he asked.

McKinnon nodded.

“Busy?” he next demanded.

The single word bristled with something more than interrogation. But McKinnon felt that he was not in a position to resent it. He stooped

over the last of his wireless models and lifted the box back against the closet door.

“I am packing away my stuff for the night,” he answered as he turned back to his operating-table and caught up his earphones. His action in doing so was simply a rite of repudiation. The gesture was not lost on the other man.

“I guess you’re busy to-night,” he said; “I won’t take up your time. All I wanted was to close up that agreement of ours.”

He reached into his pocket and drew out his roll of bills placidly, with the businesslike unconcern of a man contemptuous of small transactions. He counted off nine hundred and forty dollars, folded them together, and flung them on the pine table. McKinnon, all the while, was thinking of the half-shut closet door.

“That puts us even, doesn’t it?” Duffy said, backing away a little. His movement brought him nearer to the ever-menacing door.

McKinnon was not in a state to argue it out with him. His strangely self-frustrating wish was still to cry everything off. But he was afraid of some second complication. And he had his own reasons why these should not arise.

“Yes, that makes us even,” he admitted, suddenly remembering he had a witness to the strange business in hand. The intruder stepped back to the table again.

"Then we'll both sign this slip of paper, so we'll know where we stand," he suggested.

After Duffy had ponderously signed his name with a heavy, gold-banded fountain-pen, the operator took his place. The paper seemed nothing more than a receipt, yet something about its wording was repugnant to him. He did not take time to analyse his feeling; he was too oppressed by the thought of the woman and the near-by door. He ventured one half-hearted objection, however, as Duffy thrust the pen in his hand.

"I can't say I altogether like this," he complained.

"Why not?"

McKinnon forced a laugh.

"It sounds like an army commission."

"Where d'you want it changed?" Duffy demanded as he fell to pacing the cabin. His wandering threw McKinnon into a sudden panic.

"It's not the wording—it's the signing of a thing like this."

"Of course it is," the other agreed, mild and indulging, as a doctor might be with a peevish and restless patient. "But weren't you saying you wanted to make this every-day work of yours a little more romantic?"

He had stopped in front of the closet door

and was apparently studying the faded map of the Caribbean. The position was perilous.

“Where do I sign?” demanded McKinnon, bringing the other man back to his side at the table.

The ink was scarcely dry on the paper before a change crept into Duffy’s manner. He seemed more sure of himself, more conscious of mastery over an ally, who, if a reluctant one, was still an ally.

He folded the receipt and dropped it into his leather wallet. Then he placed the wallet in his breast pocket; his movements were always ponderous and deliberative.

“Remember, this means a devil of a lot to me. I’ll have to depend on you to do the right thing when the time comes.”

“It’s not that bad, is it?” the operator asked, still with an effort at humour.

“It may be as bad as either of us could imagine,” Duffy retorted.

“If that’s the way it’s shaping I’d better draw out of it.”

McKinnon seemed more and more resentful of the other’s attitude of masterfulness.

Duffy slowly tapped the pocket which held his wallet.

“It’s too late for you to draw out of it,” he

declared with heat. Then his mounting tinge of anger went suddenly out of his face.

“Pshaw! what’re we squabbling about, anyway?” he cried. “We’re both making easy money out of this, and that’s an end of it. We’ll have time to talk later on. And I guess you’re busy to-night.”

There was a veiled tone of mockery in his voice that seemed to leave McKinnon a little troubled. He followed his visitor to the stateroom door in silence.

“We’ll pull together,” assuaged Duffy largely, suavely, as he stepped out on the deck. “We’ve got to, eh?” He laughed a little as he said “Good-night.”

“Good-night,” answered the operator.

The stateroom door had scarcely closed before the woman had pushed aside the model-case and was out of her hiding-place. Her face had lost its last vestige of colour.

“Oh!” she cried pantingly, and nothing more.

“Hush!” said the alarmed operator, listening at the closed door.

She stood there, breathing hard, with her hand on her breast. Her attitude reminded him of the night before, when she had so suddenly and disturbingly stepped back into his cabin.

“What is it?”

“*That man!*” the woman exclaimed. She

looked older now under the trying white light of the electrics. Her aura of belated youth had in some way fallen away from her. "*Madre de Dios!* Do you know who that man is?"

"He's an agent named Duffy," explained McKinnon.

"Duffy!"

"Yes—he is acting for the information bureau of the Consolidated Fruit Concern."

He was about to say more, but on second thoughts he kept silent.

"Duffy!" once more cried the woman in derision, "Duffy!"

Then she drew herself up and gazed at her companion with what seemed a look of mingled wonder and contempt wrinkling her low, white brow.

"And you two are working together?" she murmured.

"Yes, in a way."

"But how?" she demanded. "How are you acting with him?"

Her alarm did not seem to disconcert him.

"It's not exactly a partnership. He's simply shadowing a man on this boat. I've promised to help him out when the time comes."

"How help him out?"

"Only in a trivial way."

"But how?"

“If you must know, by holding back certain despatches.”

“But whose despatches?” still demanded the woman.

“Despatches for the man he’s shadowing, of course.”

“But still you don’t tell me who this man is!” cried the impatient woman. McKinnon obviously found it hard to fathom the source of her anxieties.

“I mean this man called Ganley,” he explained, concealing his growing impatience.

“Ganley!” echoed the woman.

“Yes, Ganley,” retorted the other. He noticed that her breath was coming in short gasps by this time and that her face was as white as his cabin walls.

“Ganley!” she cried. “Why, *the man who went out of this cabin five minutes ago is Ganley!*”

CHAPTER VIII

THE PAWN AND THE BOARD

THERE was a silence of several seconds.

“*That man was Ganley?*” foolishly repeated the operator. His eyes, as he peered back at the woman, were almost vacuous. He studied her face, perplexed and uncertain, like a traveller studying a road-map. He had expected surprises, he had prepared himself for emergencies: but this, apparently, was more than he had counted on.

The frightened-eyed woman still confronted him, her face seeming one of pity touched with fear. When she next moved, her gesture was almost that of a person wringing their hands.

“And you have promised to act with this man?” she little more than whispered.

“But he came to me as a man named Duffy, the man who’s got to turn Ganley over to the authorities at Puerto Locombia.”

Still again the woman’s wide and pitying eyes rested on his face.

“They are making a tool of you,” was all she said.

“Of me?”

“Of you! They are deceiving you—they mean to make use of you.”

“But how?”

The woman remained silent. McKinnon stood before her, lost in a moment of troubled thought, puzzled as to how much he should say and how much it would be best to leave unsaid.

“But who are *you*?” he suddenly demanded, noting her quick glance down at her little jewelled watch. He felt, as she stood there compelling herself to calmness, that there was something epochal in the moment, that in some way the uncomprehended was about to reveal itself.

He turned slowly about and relocked the cabin door. Then he sat down opposite the broken steamer-chair in which she was already seated.

“You want to know who that man is?” she said at last, perplexed a little by his sudden decisiveness, disturbed by the hardening of his face.

“I want to know who *you* are.”

“That will come later,” she explained.

McKinnon studied her face, line by line, from the pale ivory of her dark-browed forehead to the tender curve of her almost statuelike chin, for the shadowy and thick-planted lashes did

not lift from her cheek until she began to speak again.

“You want me to explain everything?” she asked.

“Everything!”

“The man who was in this room is Kaiser Ganley—King-maker Ganley they call him everywhere south of Guatemala. His business is to make revolutions. He has agents in almost every one of the Central American republics, in New York, in Cuba, in New Orleans—everywhere. When he sees signs of unrest he sends a man to strike a bargain with the enemies of the government. He waits like a buzzard on a housetop until his meal is ready. Then he is given money, and he brings so many men and so many carbines, and so many mules and machine guns. Sometimes it’s for the patriots, sometimes it’s for railway charters or for mine rights. Sometimes it’s for rubber and coffee concessions. A more conciliatory man must be made dictator, or a more dependable friend must be set up as president. That’s the way he won the Caqueta Asphalt concession; that’s why he never dares land in Brazil or be seen in Venezuela again.”

She paused for a moment. Then she added:

“And now he has the rebellion in Locombia. The Locombian president has been called the

'Friend of Foreigners'; he has been good to the *Americanos*. He is modern and progressive; he is——”

“Are you a Locombian?”

“I am not a Locombian,” answered the woman, after the slightest pause, “but I have my interests in that country. Oh, believe me, I know this man to be its enemy. He is fighting for the downfall of its government. His plan is made. He is only waiting for the end. Now, to-night, while we sit here, his men—deluded peons and beachcombers and paid mercenaries—are drawing up closer and closer on Guariqui. They are to wait there; they are to be moved, like wooden pawns on a chessboard, when he orders it, and in the manner he orders.”

“Can’t you tell me how or when? Can’t you be more specific?”

“On the thirteenth of the month a revolutionist, wearing the uniform of the government, is to assault an American citizen in the Prado of Puerto Locombia. A Mobile ore-boat is to take the assaulter on board openly. He is to be dragged ashore again by government officers. Roof-tiles are to be flung down on these officers as they pass through the town. Arrests, of course, will follow. That will arouse the people—they are so foolish in their hate for the *Americanos*! And while this is going on, many

miles up the coast machine guns will be landed, and tubs of cartridges, and two thousand rifles."

"But how do you know all this?"

"It became my duty to know it."

"But why?"

"Because my brother is Arturo Boynton, the Locombian minister of war," she answered, after a moment's silence.

McKinnon gazed at her in a mingling of wonder and perplexity.

"Is he a Locombian?"

"No."

"Then why the Arturo?"

"That was a concession to local prejudices," she answered, after still another moment's pause.

"But why such concessions? You see, you'll have to be perfectly frank with me."

She smiled a little. It was not a smile of condescension, for her earnest eyes were almost deprecative as she looked at him.

"That will mean a sad lot of family history," she said with a little shrug, as exotic, almost, as the Southern inflection of her voice.

He laughed a little, too, for all the anxiety that was weighing on him.

"But you see we have to understand each other's position in this."

"My brother went to Guariqui seven years ago," she said, quite sober by this time. "He was compelled to go there to look after my father's nitrate claims."

"Your father, then, was an American?" interrupted McKinnon. He felt glad, in some vague way, as he saw her head-shake of assent.

"He was an American soldier," she said, and McKinnon noticed the almost phosphorescent kindling of her eyes as she uttered the words.

"Yes," he responded encouragingly.

"We are—or, rather, we used to be the New Orleans Boyntons," she answered. "But father had interests in Argentina, cattle lands and things, and property in Belgrano, where the English-speaking colony is, just outside Buenos Ayres. So for nine years Buenos Ayres was our home—if you could say we ever had a home. But as I wanted to tell you, my brother Arturo was a mining engineer. I think, too, he had a good deal of father's spirit of adventure. He saw great chances in Locombia, but what was more important, he found that the altitude of Guariqui agreed with him. So he stayed on and on, and kept working harder and harder, and getting newer interests, until finally he undertook to work the abandoned government mines with Doctor Duran. They were copper mines."

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“Do you mean Duran the president?”

“Yes; but that was before he had been made president. Indeed, when Duran first actively entered Locombian politics he persuaded my brother to join him. I was at school then, in France—but I know that when their party came into power my brother found himself in Duran’s cabinet, as minister of war.”

“And you are going down there to face all this?” McKinnon asked, with a vaguely comprehensive wave of the arm.

The woman said “Yes.” She looked, for all her inalienable aura of vitality, very slender, and unsuited to the ways of war, above all things, to the ways of Latin-American guerilla war.

“But that seems as brutal, as unthinkable, as a girl going into a ring with two prize-fighters,” he tried to explain to her.

“Yes, I know; but I’m not going *into* the ring,” she answered. “All I can do is hover about the outside edges of it, and do what I can when I know there is underhand work, when there is foul play like this going on.”

“Foul play like what?”

“Like *this!*” she averred, tapping the deck with her shoe-heel.

“Do you mean the *Laminian*? Or do you

mean certain persons who are on the *Laminian?*"

"Both," she retorted.

"Then that brings us to the question of just why you are going back to Locombia in such a way and at such a time," McKinnon patiently insisted.

"But Guariqui is my home—it is the only home I have, now." She noticed the fleeting look of concern, that amounted to anxiety, over-spreading his face, and she hastened to add, with her slow and almost mournful smile: "You know, they often speak of it as the Paris of America! We don't actually tattoo each other down there! And there's something appealing in the life, when you've got used to it—the stir and colour and romance and movement of it all."

"But you see you haven't yet quite explained *why* you are going back to Locombia."

Her deep and troubled eyes seemed to be weighing him; she seemed to be pondering his possible weakness and strength.

"How can I explain to you, when you're a paid agent of Ganley's?"

"Don't be too sure of that!" McKinnon ejaculated, with more feeling, apparently, than the woman had expected.

"You mean you may not work with him?"

"If you like to take it that way."

"But he has won you over to his side—he has captured you against your will!"

"I don't quite understand," persisted the operator.

"No; but Ganley does. That's why he has bought you over, and led you into his power in this way." She was speaking more rapidly now; a brightened colour had come into her cheeks.

"But how am I in his power?" McKinnon asked.

"What was the paper you signed? What have you promised? What was the money paid over to you for?"

"To hold back certain messages."

"Yes, to hold back messages. And why do that?"

"So that this man Ganley—the man he calls Ganley—can be held at Puerto Locombia."

"You mean the *other* man, the man in the cabin? Then you don't believe what I have said about the real Ganley?"

"I don't know what to believe," the non-committal McKinnon complained, studying the woman's face. The only conclusion he came to was that it was a disturbingly beautiful one.

She was silent for a moment, apparently deep in thought.

“I don’t ask you to believe me now—it’s not fair. But do you realise where you stand?”

The solemnity of her manner, more than her words, prompted McKinnon to ask: “Where do you think I stand?”

“Before danger you scarcely dream of,” answered the young woman, returning his gaze. “It’s not so much that you have formed an alliance with a criminal, an outlaw, who would have to face a *fusilado* the moment he was caught in Guariqui. But it’s the fact that he’s as treacherous with his friends as with his foes. You have declared yourself his partner. He will hold you to it. He will use this paper you signed as a proof that you accepted hush-money, if it suits his purpose to do so. He will claim you agreed to work with him. He will hold this over you and force you to act for him.”

“But why should I stand for coercion like that?” asked the undisturbed McKinnon.

“What would you do? You can’t go to your captain; nor to your company. It’s too late for that. You’ve cut yourself off from them. But that isn’t the real danger. The real danger is that Ganley’s the actual head of the revolutionary *Junta*, and that he can now show that you, too, are one of them!”

“That I’m one of them?” almost laughed the other.

"He holds a document which practically brands you as a Locombian revolutionist. We are being carried to a country where things move strangely and quickly. If Duran has the upper hand when we reach Puerto Locombia, you dare not make one move against this man Ganley."

"I dare not, you say?"

"If you do, he will have you handed over to Duran's officers as an enemy of the government—and he will have his document to prove it. If Duran has been deposed, then Ganley is the open and undisputed master, and what he orders you will have to carry out."

"But I'm not going down there to be that government's catspaw!"

"How will you escape it?"

"Well, one way would be to call Ganley up here and get that paper back."

Alicia Boynton laughed quickly and quietly, with an upthrust of her shoulders.

"Can't you see that it's too late? The price has been paid; the bargain's been struck."

"Not necessarily!"

"But a man like Ganley never trades back. The mistake was in the signing of the paper. It was a manifesto, a confession. It was the last will and testament of your good name."

McKinnon, who had been pacing the cabin,

suddenly swung about and faced the young woman in the steamer-chair.

“Why are you saying all this to me?” he demanded.

Her troubled eyes once more rested on him, almost in pity.

“Because we are facing a common danger,” she answered at last. “Because we may yet have to work together to escape from that danger.”

“But you haven’t told me anything. You haven’t explained how or why *you* are in this danger.”

Again her studious eyes seemed to be weighing and judging him. He knew by the anxiety that crept slowly into her face as she watched him that her decision was not altogether a flattering one.

“I am here because there was no one to take my place,” she answered, simply enough. “I can’t explain everything now, but I knew they were plotting against Guariqui and against my brother. I knew, at the last moment, that Ganley was hurrying to Locombia, and I knew that the authorities at Washington were sending a cruiser to the Caribbean, to be near in case of trouble.”

“You mean the *Princeton*?” McKinnon asked. The woman nodded.

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“Listen,” she went on after another moment of thought. “Anything may happen before we reach Puerto Locombia. If the *Junta* have carried out Ganley’s plans, everything will be ready for his *coup d’état*.”

Her words, for some reason, did not impress him as much as she had expected. She felt that perhaps she was not being specific enough, that she was not making the case sufficiently clear.

“This movement against Guariqui will not be easy,” she hurried on to explain, “unless the field-guns have already been landed. The palace is of stone; it could stand to the last—it was built for such purposes. It could hold out for weeks, with only the president’s body-guard, until help came.”

“From where?” asked McKinnon.

“That is what I must explain. When Duran installed the electric-light plant at Puerto Locombia he put up a wireless station, one at the coast, and another on the palace at Guariqui. Unless the guns have been landed, there is to be no assault on the capital until Ganley has been heard from. Puerto Locombia, of course, will be in the hands of the revolutionists. They will destroy the wireless station at the coast. There are few or no ships there now, on account of the yellow fever. It’s not the fever, of course, but the quarantine—the weeks and weeks of impris-

onment—they are afraid of. This ship will be the only one in the roadstead."

She watched his face with almost a touch of impatience. She looked for some glance or gesture of enlightenment on his part. But he gave no sign of comprehension; so she was forced to go on, explicitly, like a tutor slowly demonstrating the obvious to a perversely backward pupil.

"You are equipped with wireless. That means you will be able to talk with Guariqui. If Duran and my brother are shut up there, calling for help, you will be the only person to hear their messages. Can't you understand? The Guariqui station is not one of high power. It can't possibly call beyond the coast. Yet the cruiser is to be lying somewhere between Culebra and Locombia, waiting to help, only too anxious to interfere at the first official call. But that call can never reach them without being relayed from the roadstead, out across the Caribbean. You may be the only person who can hear and understand Guariqui's cry for help."

CHAPTER IX

THE CONVERGING TRAILS

MCKINNON drew in a deeper breath, slowly and leisurely, but he did not speak.

“Can’t you understand?” the young woman in the blue pilot-cloth gown was anxiously demanding of him. “Ganley has thought this all out. He found out we carry wireless equipment. He knew this call would come to us. He has foreseen that we could relay it from Puerto Locombia to the *Princeton*. He knows that you, and you alone, could send that message out of Locombia.”

“And you still think he’s tried to tie me up, to keep me from sending it! And you insist that those first despatches he filed were simply blinds!”

“Just as his pretense of shadowing Ganley was a blind!” was her prompt retort.

McKinnon fell to pacing the cabin again. The woman watched him without speaking. Then the operator came to a sudden pause.

"But I'm not free yet. That schemer still has me tied down to him, as you say. We haven't got that paper out of his hands."

The woman nodded her head slowly, without any outward emotion.

"He could still discredit me with the captain of this tub, if that happened to be part of his game! He'd show us both to be a pair of liars the moment we tried to corner him!"

"And once at Puerto Locombia, if his plans have worked out as he wants them to, he can have us dragged ashore! And if Guariqui falls he can have us held as enemies of the new government!"

"*This is a nice mess!*" calmly meditated the long-limbed man standing before her, facing her, for the moment, with abstracted and unseeing eyes. He even seemed to have forgotten the presence of the woman.

She rose from her chair and stood before him.

"We have to get back that foolish paper," she said. "Before everything else we must get back your receipt."

The quiet determination of her voice startled him a little. He stood regarding her with a new light in his eyes. All his training had been repressional; his life had taught him to resist every threatened surrender to the emotional. Yet, as he saw her there, so isolated from her

kind, so apparently unfitted for the tasks before her, so insidiously appealing in her tender womanhood, a warm and winelike current of sympathy began to creep incongruously through his veins. She must have caught some inkling of that soft invasion, for suddenly, and without apparent reason, her face deepened in colour and then grew paler than before. She held out her hand as though to bridge the awkward silence that had fallen between them. McKinnon saw it was a gesture of farewell.

“Will you promise me to do nothing until I have got this receipt back for you?” she asked as he still held her outstretched hand.

“But why should *you* fight my battles for me?” he asked, wincing a little before her open and courageous gaze. “I can’t have you turn highwayman for me?”

There was welling up in him a wayward sense of guardianship over her isolated and fragile figure, of responsibility for her safety and well-being.

“It must be done,” she declared with a bitterness that surprised him a little. “There are two doors to Ganley’s cabin. It is one of a suite. I can get in through one of those doors.”

“Through one of those doors?” echoed the man before her.

“Yes; to-night.”

“To-night?” cried McKinnon, looking down at her in mingled protest and astonishment.

“Hush!” she warned, with her fingers held up close before his face. Their accidental contact with his lips sent a responsive thrill through his nervous body.

“But I won’t hear of you doing this sort of thing just because I’ve been all kinds of a fool. I’m going to this man Duffy, or Ganley, or whatever his name is—I’m going to face him myself and make him put this whole thing right.”

“That is impossible,” she warned him in her tense whisper. “You do not understand. You don’t know this man’s ways.”

He could see some definite yet mysterious fear shadowed on her face.

“But think of what you’re threatening to do!” McKinnon argued. “You have to break into this brute’s cabin and steal back a receipt! Think of the risk you’d be running!”

“It has to be done; the sooner it’s done the better.”

“But why does it have to be done in this way?” persisted McKinnon.

“Because *you* must not do it!”

“Why not?”

“It would be like cannonading canaries—you must save yourself for the bigger risks!”

Her unuttered misery, her inarticulate anx-

iety, more and more disturbed and depressed him. But there were many things on which he was still uncertain, and above all things he knew that he must go slow.

The woman confronting him must have seen some flash of doubt on his face, for she caught at his arm with a sudden little movement that was as imploring as it was feminine.

“You don’t trust me? You don’t believe what I have told you?” she cried in her hurrying, low-toned whisper.

“No! no! It’s not that!” McKinnon answered. “But I can’t quite see my way out—I can’t see what it’s all leading to.”

“But nothing can happen now, here at sea. And you will understand later. Promise me you’ll wait!”

“Yes; but wait for what?”

“Until you are free to act, and you know what I have said is true.”

He took a turn up and down the cabin. “Is this paper so important? I mean, isn’t this a lot of fuss and feathers about a small thing?”

“It’s one of the small things that count in war—and this is war.”

Still again he felt the inapposite and insidious appeal of her womanhood. It wound about him and tugged at him, eroding away his self-will, his old-time careless audacity of spirit, like

a current eating under a sand-bank. It made sacrifice on her behalf seem a burden to be almost gladly borne.

“Only promise me that you’ll wait!” she pleaded. His career had been one of much contention; but never before had he been compelled to fight against what seemed his own self-interest. He felt, in doing so, that he was being thrust and involved in entanglements which should have been evaded as mere side issues. He even marvelled at his sheer lack of resentment against capitulation so indeterminate and yet so complete.

“Promise me!” she whispered. He wanted to beg for time, to think things out, but her troubled face was bewilderingly close to his, and the memory that he was not innocent of the anxiety weighing upon her made him more and more miserable.

“I promise,” he answered. The clasp of her hand sent a second inapposite tingle of joy through his body.

“You *will* wait?” she insisted, as though doubly to impress on each of them some future course of action. “You will say nothing until I have done what I promise?”

“There’s nothing I can say or do,” he replied, still demanding of himself if it could be right to put her to such a test.

“Then remember,” she said, and her voice was little more than a whisper, “we are acting together.”

McKinnon still stood there, watching her, as she opened the cabin door and stepped out to the wet and gloomy deck. Something about her departure so paralleled that of the man who had gone before her that the coincidence struck him with a start. It brought the thought through him like an arrow that he had openly pledged himself to two opponents, that he had made a promise to act for two enemies. This was followed by a second and an equally disturbing thought: he had not once been honest or open with her; he was letting his lack of candour make her path a harder one than she deserved.

He sprang through the door after her, swept by a sudden fierce fire of self-hate, of contempt for the things in which he found himself involved.

A moment later he had called her back across the midnight gloom of the dipping and rocking deck.

“What is it?” she asked, as she stepped into the cabin, her eyes wide with wonder. He made sure the deck was empty, and closed the door. Then, with an obvious effort, he wheeled about and faced her.

“It may not be too late for us to get out of

this mess," he told her, "and get out of it in the right way."

"But what way?" she asked, puzzled by his unheralded change of front.

"The quick way, and the sure way," he answered, swinging across the cabin until he stood before his switch-lever. His hand hovered about the apparatus as he went on. "I mean our way out is to get the *Princeton* now, to-night, before she's out of touch with us! I mean it's best for us to play our card at once, when it's not too late! The *Princeton* has already passed us on her way to Culebra, to replace the gunboat *Eagle*; she's leaving us farther and farther behind every hour!"

"But what do we gain by getting the *Princeton* now?" Alicia Boynton demanded.

He was at the key by this time, and the "crash—rash—rrrrash" of the great spark as it leaped and exploded from the discharging-rods filled the cabin with a peremptory and authoritative tumult of sound. The woman stood watching him, spellbound. A moment later McKinnon's left hand was fidgeting above his tuner, while his right pressed a 'phone-receiver close to his ear.

"What we've got to do is to get that cruiser to Puerto Loombia," he hurriedly went on, as he waited there, without looking up. "She will

be needed; she *is* needed; and she may as well be told of it now. I mean we'll do what we've got to do while the way's still clear."

"But how can you order about an American warship as though it were a street cab you'd hired?"

"It won't be me—it'll be the wireless that does the ordering."

"But who are you?"

"That's just it—I'm nobody! I'm like those canaries you spoke of; I wouldn't be worth cannonading."

"But you have no power to do this!" demurred the still puzzled woman. "You are not the President of the United States! You have no authority to order about a battleship!"

"I'll *make* the authority!" he cried as he sprang to his key and once more called through the night. "You've said just enough to give me my chance to make my course plain. American interests are threatened in Guariqui at this very moment; American property has already been destroyed in Puerto Locombia. It's only forestalling the inevitable. I mean I'm going to send an official call for that cruiser myself!"

The woman looked at him in amazement as he swung about and clapped the 'phones once more to his ears.

"If we can only get her!" he half groaned

as he stood with bent head and fixed eyes, listening, while the seconds dragged slowly by. "If we can only get her!" he repeated less hopefully.

He turned to his switch again, and still again the great blue spark erupted and crashed and volleyed from the discharging-rods. Then again he waited and listened, the lines on his face deepening in the hard light from the electrics above him.

"The night's against us!" he exclaimed almost despairingly as the switch came purringly down on the contact-pins and his hand once more went out to his key-lever. His fingers closed on the handle, but the intended call was not sent. No nervous flash of blue flame bridged the waiting spark-gap. For even before he turned, McKinnon knew that his cabin door had been suddenly opened and that a squat and thick-set figure stood there peering in at him.

"What're you workin' that key for?" demanded the figure. It was the thunderous voice of the ship's master, Captain Yandel. McKinnon remembered that he must have overheard the spark-kiss at the masthead, from the bridge.

"What're you tryin' to send out there?" repeated the officer.

"I'm getting distances from a Standard Oil

tank," answered the man at the table after just a moment of hesitation.

"Distances at this time o' night?"

"You heard what I said, didn't you?" cried the defiant McKinnon.

The enraged officer let his glance wander to the woman, who had backed away a little, as near to the door as possible. McKinnon did not move, but he was thinking both hard and fast. He had already seen the look on the other man's face.

"What's this woman doing here?" demanded Captain Yandel.

The long-limbed operator shot up out of his chair angrily at the barb in that thunderous voice. He kept telling himself to keep cool. It was plainly to be seen that he was still untutored in accepting insolence without protest. Yet still again the challenge was flung at him.

"What's this woman doing in this station at this time o' night?"

McKinnon turned slowly about.

"Shall I tell him?" he asked. His voice was so quiet and seemingly self-contained that the woman's first blind panic of fear slipped away from her.

"Yes, tell him," she answered.

The captain strode into the cabin. He stood behind Alicia Boynton, a little to one side; Mc-

Kinnon, from the operating-table, faced the intruder. The tones of his voice as he spoke carried a tacit reproof to his superior, a reproof for the boisterous note that had been thrust upon their quiet and orderly talk.

“This woman is my wife!”

“Your what?” cried the captain.

“This woman is my wife!” repeated the operator, without so much as a glance at the panting girl’s colourless face. “As you may have the discernment to discover, she is a civilised being, and brutality has no particular fascination for her!”

“And what’s all that to do with it?” demanded the captain, warming up to a scene from which he could usually wring his sardonic delights.

“It has this to do with it—that she is making this trip as a passenger. I mention the fact because you may see her in this cabin again, at many times, and at hours quite as unusual as the present.”

“I will, will I?” retorted the other.

“You will! And what’s more, so long as I do my duty by this ship, and by my company, her presence here calls for no insolence, either official or unofficial!”

“You be *damned!*” roared the master of the ship, aghast at such effrontery.

“There again I’m afraid I must both disappoint you and disagree with you. And at the same time I’d like to call your attention to the fact that this is a wireless station, and that it stands under the protection of the Berlin International Concordat!”

“To hell with you and your Concordats! This is my ship——”

“Precisely; and I, unfortunately, have been put here to do my work, and I’m——”

“Yes, by Heaven!” broke in the irate captain, “you’re here to do your work! You were stuck in here under my nose, for reasons I don’t understand; but when you’re here you’re goin’ to do your work as I say! And what’s more, I want you to bear in mind that I intend to stay master o’ this ship! And while I’m master o’ this ship I want no insolence from upstart wire-stretchers! So you do your despatchin’ in regular hours, and when I say so, or I’ll ship you back to your company in irons!”

CHAPTER X

THE REVERSE OF THE SHIELD

THE captain of the *Laminian* wheeled about and strode out of the cabin, swinging the door shut with a slam that loosened flakes of white-lead paint from the ceiling-boards.

“So *he*’s against us, too!” murmured the operator.

There was a moment of unbroken silence before the woman looked up.

“Why did you say that to him?” she demanded, trembling with indignation. Even her voice shook a little as she spoke. “How dare you say a thing like that?”

McKinnon crossed the room until he stood almost at her side.

“I had to say that,” he answered. “It was the only way out.”

“A lie—a base lie like that—the only way out?”

“Yes, the only way, for now that man must not suspect.”

“Suspect what?”

“What each of us knows!”

“But you have just challenged his power; you’ve disclaimed his authority! What can *he* do?”

“He can do anything! On the high seas he’s king over this little floating kingdom of his.”

“And you, too, are under him?”

“As much as one of his stokers, in a way.”

“But what have you gained by a lie like this?”

He found it hard to understand her scruples, to fathom her indignation. He stopped her as she started to speak again.

“Wait! Don’t say anything more until I try to explain what it means to you.”

He peered out along the deck and then slipped the bolt in the cabin door before he turned to her again.

“Listen! What I have to say is only the other half of your own story, of what you yourself have said. If Duran and his army are shut up in Guariqui, it’s because they’re there *without ammunition!*”

“You know that?” she cried.

“Yes; and this man Ganley knows it. He knows it because he’s been the cause of it. Six hundred thousand rounds of ammunition went out of Mobile for the Locombian troops, for

Ulloa and his men. They were carried to Puerto Locombia on the *Santa Anna*, secretly, in barrels that were labelled and invoiced as cement, so they could be shipped on to Guariqui without suspicion. But Ganley or the *Junta* or their spies got to know of it. The *Santa Anna* was scuttled in the roadstead at Puerto Locombia. Those cartridges went to the bottom—forty-six barrels with double heads, the heads holding a sprinkling of cement and the main space full of cartridges packed in excelsior. Every pound of it went down."

"This can't be true!" almost groaned the girl at his side.

"Every word of it's true. But let me go on. De Brigard and his men have been in almost as bad a predicament. This advantage was useless unless he had ammunition for his own men. That's where Ganley came in. His agents found that ground iron slag, packed in cases, weighed up to just about what a case of cartridges would. So they bought eighty-eight cases of iron slag from a Hudson River factory town and ferried it down to New York. It was consigned to Locombia, properly enough, as basic iron silicate for fluxing purposes. The law compels all such exporters to file with the port collector a distinct declaration of the goods shipped, the country shipped to, and the name of the consignee. This

has to be accompanied by oath. Besides the due inspection of the shipment, the shipper has to make his declaration before the consul of the country to which any such goods are sent. All this was done."

"But how do you know this?"

"Let's say that I stumbled upon it in my work as a wireless operator. But here is the real point: in some way, which needn't now concern us, those innocent boxes of powdered slag were tampered with. They became cases neatly packed with ammunition, with just enough iron silicate thrown in to fill up the chinks and cover the real contents. In other words, Ganley and his men have sent out of New York five hundred and eighty thousand rounds of ammunition, consigned to the revolutionary *Junta* at Puerto Loombia!"

"But how do you know this?" once more demanded the listening woman.

"Let me finish, please. Along with those cartridges were sent eight cases of 'structural iron.' These cases, in reality, contain eight hundred Remington rifles. And not only has this stuff been sent out of New York by Ganley and his men, but these guns and cartridges at this very moment *are on this ship, and under this very deck!*"

Alicia Boynton sank slowly down into the

steamer-chair against which she had been leaning. McKinnon could see that her breath was coming fast and short.

"This can't be true!" she whispered, letting her hands fall weakly between her knees. "They may have said this, but it was only to deceive you, to point out some false trail!"

"One moment, until I explain. I am only the wireless operator on this boat. I am a newcomer, as well, for this is my first run. One hour before the *Laminian* sailed her old operator failed to report, and could not be found. The De Forest Company at once hurried a new man over to the ship. I am that man."

"Still I don't understand. Why are you here?"

"That's what the captain of this ship is so uncertain about. That's why he's so down on us! That's why he's sneaking about and spying on this cabin like a cat on a mouse-hole! I don't mean that he's a paid agent of the *Junta*—I don't even believe he knows what this ship is carrying. He's only soured with alcohol, and jealous—bullheadedly jealous—of his little world of authority."

"But still you haven't told me who you are, or why you came here."

"I am a wireless operator," he said after a moment's glance into the girl's clear eyes, as

though to fathom just how brightly the old-time fires of intelligence were burning there.

“What *were* you?” she was asking him, her note of frustration seeming to merge into one of distrust.

“I’ll have to go back, away back, to make even that clear to you.”

“Please do.”

“Well, it was over five years ago that I first went to Peru, to look after the electrical equipment of the Pachita Water Power Corporation. They had to protect the forests on their power watersheds, so I wired their whole countryside and equipped their fire-rangers with portable telephones. That meant they could cut in anywhere and send for help in case of emergency. But a peon or a gaucho wouldn’t stand for witchcraft like that, and the *mandador* sorrowfully intimated that I was too modern.

“So I next found myself in Nicaragua, with the task of superintending certain telegraph-construction work for Zelaya. When that was finished, for two years I was in the intelligence department of the Brazilian government, but the climate wasn’t the sort that a white man could thrive on, and I had to give it up. Then, when the Masso Parra trouble first broke out Magoon invited me over to Pinar del Rio and

consigned me to a wireless station there. My real duty at Pinar del Rio was to forward cipher reports to Havana and keep the authorities there in proper touch with any filibuster movements in the affected district. Then came a lean year, when I tallied coffee-bags and banana-bunches from a roof-car at Port Limon, until I elbowed my way into a position as night operator on the Costa Rican Northern. It's all very tame to tell about, yet it had its compensating touches of adventure now and then. But I wanted to get North and work out some electrical apparatus that had been preying on my mind."

He came to a stop.

"And you went North?" she prompted him. He looked up with his quick smile.

"You know there's a certain group of rocks on the Olancho River, near Jutigalpa, where the water is beautifully clear. They say that if you once dive from that cliff, no matter where you go, you will return to Olancho, in the end, that you will die somewhere along the fringe of the Caribbean. I took that dive."

She gave vent to her habitual little head-shake.

"They say the same thing if you drink from the *Fontana di Trevi* in Rome. It's very pretty, but, of course, it's also very foolish."

"In one way it is, but still it's hard to explain how the unattached man from the North is held by the tropics. That's what made me catch at the old bait when I had a chance to go to the Cantonese District to look into the Chinese boycott affair. And it's the same thing, I suppose, that's taking me south to Locombia."

The girl gave vent to a gesture of impatience,
"That doesn't explain."

"What more can I say?" he demanded. He struggled to conceal the fact that he was afraid of her, that life had always taught him to be wary before the unknown factor in the equation of adventure, that her very softness was something against which he had to steel himself, grimly and resolutely.

"You can say everything you have so carefully left unsaid," was her unexpectedly spirited answer.

"There's nothing more," he protested, feeling the silence grow heavy about him.

"I trusted *you*!" said the girl at last.

"And I would trust you!" he said quite openly and honestly.

"You mean you are not free to speak?" she persisted, evading the personal issue which his declaration had thrust before her.

"I mean that it's worse than foolish for us to quibble over side issues when we're confront-

ed by things of so much more importance. I mean, for instance, that this steamer is carrying ammunition to De Brigard and his men. If that ammunition is delivered into the hands of the Locombian Government instead of to their enemies, Ulloa and his army can at once re-enter the field."

"But why *re-enter* the field? They are free."

"In a way, yes; but they are now shut up in Guariqui, practically, with only a few thousand reserve cartridges and a half ton of useless cordite. But the moment they have made sure that the *Laminian* is safely tied up at the pier in Puerto Locombia they plan to run a banana-train, armoured with boiler-plate, down through De Brigard's lines to the coast. They will fight their way down, probably under cover of night, run their cars out on the pier next to the *Laminian*'s berth, seize their slag-boxes as contraband of war, and fight their way back to Guariqui."

"You *know* this?"

"It is the knowledge of this," he guardedly replied, "which makes me say that you and I are compelled, or will be compelled, to act together."

Alicia Boynton did not speak for several seconds, but her studious eyes were fixed on McKinnon's face.

"You mean that you might be able to warn them?" she asked at last.

"I mean that it might be possible, under certain conditions, for Duran's palace operator to get a message from me. It might also be possible for your brother's men to be aboard this boat five or six hours after that message was received. So why not explain the whole situation by saying that both of us chance to be acting for the same cause? We're fighting for the same end, so no matter how it hurts, or whatever may happen, *we must stick together!*"

"But why leave any mystery between us, if we are already that close?" asked the girl. "Why can't you still tell me everything?"

"I'm beginning to learn that you can't tell things, in my calling, until you're sure of your ground. That's why I had to fling that lie to the captain. It's warfare—and I've got to be true to my people before everything else."

"But who are your people?" she persisted.

He laughed, a little wearily, a little ambiguously. "I have no people," he said. "But we've got to fight for Guariqui, whatever it costs!"

CHAPTER XI

THE MOVEMENT IN RETREAT

It was the next morning that McKinnon came unexpectedly face to face with Alicia Boynton in one of the *Laminian's* narrow companion-ways. He was hurrying up to his operating-room after a brief mockery of a breakfast in the ship's musty-odoured dining-saloon, and would have passed on with nothing more than an unbetraying nod. But the anxious-eyed young woman, with a barely perceptible gesture, signalled for him to turn back.

He followed her at a discreet distance as she stepped into a damp-carpeted side corridor flanked by white-leaded cabin doors. She quietly opened one of these, with a half-obliterated "7" on its lintel, and motioned him inside.

He surmised at a glance that it was her state-room. He next noticed that she had closed the door and locked it. Something in the quick decisiveness and directness of her movements touched him to a fleeting moment of admiration.

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He was conscious of the fact, as he turned to her, that his earlier sense of uneasiness had departed from him.

“Listen,” said the quiet-moving and clear-eyed girl, peering impersonally up at him as she spoke, and yet standing so close that her sleeve brushed his hand. “I’ve been thinking a great deal about that foolish receipt. It’s the only thing, now, that stands between us and our freedom of action. We have cleared away so much; but this is still one of the things that stand between us. I mean it’s still a danger to you—much more a danger than I can make you understand, unless you know how treacherous and vindictive this man Ganley can be.”

“But why should I be afraid of Ganley?” McKinnon maintained. “I can fight him in his own way. I *am* fighting him in his own way.”

“You might do it at home, in your own country,” she warned him, “but not in Locombia—not anywhere in Latin America. He knows his ground too well, his tricks and his chances, his burrows of escape when he needs them. He would never give you a fighting chance. That’s why we must do what we can, at once, without delay.”

Still again he marvelled at her directness of purpose and movement, at her unequivocating

frankness of outlook. It implied, he felt, a courage seldom demanded or met with in the im-mured and upholstered walls of a modern woman's world.

"I thought it could be done this morning," she went on hurriedly, yet in a tone so low that he had to stoop a little to catch her words. "Ganley left his cabin early; I was ready and waiting. The moment he was away I let myself into his room."

She stopped to smile at his start of astonish-
ment.

"I had won over my stewardess," she went on. "A few dollars completed the conquest and made everything so much easier. She even found a pass-key that fitted. I could see it was dangerous, and I had very little time. But I failed. The receipt was not there."

"But you can't do this sort of thing," Mc-
Kinnon expostulated. He remembered an earlier speech of hers: "It's one of the small things that count in war—and this is war."

"Isn't it rather late for going back over that ground?" she was saying.

"But this sort of thing involves too much risk! It's too unfair to you!"

"I looked through everything, as far as I could," the girl at his side went on, not heeding

his protest. "I could find no trace of the receipt."

"Of course not! He shows the value he puts on it by carrying it about on his person, in his wallet."

"But there was something else I *did* find out," she said, lowering her voice; and again he was struck by the aura of sheer vigour that seemed always to float and cling about her. "It's the fact that eight mountain-guns are to be shipped out of Mobile this week, invoiced and crated as steam-laundry equipment. They are Hotchkiss rapid-fire guns, breech-loading, and with fixed ammunition. Those are the guns that are to be landed somewhere in northern Locombia. They can be taken apart, piece by piece, and carried up through the hills to Guariqui on burros."

"And he had the coolness to send out a wireless about that equipment!" commented McKinnon. The woman, with a warning look, motioned for him to speak more quietly.

"My second discovery was even more important. It began with what seems to be a note from one of De Brigard's generals. They are still afraid of some counter-movement to seize their cartridge shipment. I mean they are worrying about the very ammunition on this ship, the cartridges in the slag-boxes you spoke about.

As far as I can make out, they intend to commandeer a certain track-motor from the Consolidated Fruit Concern. They are to seize it and take it from the roundhouse just north of Puerto Locombia."

"What kind of track-motor?" broke in the thoughtful-eyed operator.

"It's a specially built sixty-horse-power Birmingham motor, belonging to the railway department of the Fruit Concern. I can remember when it was first imported, a year ago. The new railway construction engineers have been using it instead of a coach and locomotive for inspecting the ore-road extensions and the narrow-gauge banana lines that have been run out into the Parroto plantations. You see, it's so light in weight that six or eight peons can lift it about on the track; they can reverse it without a turntable. De Brigard's men intend to run this motor out on the railway along the pier, at night, and keep it hidden in the Fruit Concern's weigh-scales shed, not forty feet from where the *Laminian* will be sure to dock. Then, as far as I can make out, the slag-boxes are to be quietly dropped over the side and piled up in the motor's tonneau. Then it is to be hurried out along the railway track to Cocoanut Hill, where everything is to be stored in the

power-house until the *Junta* distributes the supplies to De Brigard's men."

"But what power-house is this?"

"I mean the electric-light power-house just outside the town."

"This is worth knowing!" said McKinnon, his leaping thought already struggling to bridge the vicissitudes of the future.

"But this isn't the problem that's blocking our way," his companion warned him. "The first thing we must do is to recover our lost ground. We have to get back this receipt that ties you down to Ganley."

"But even for that we have to wait our chance."

"Why not make the chance?"

"How make it?"

"Ganley is in hourly dread of every message that comes into your wireless-room. He insists on censoring anything that might betray him. Then, after he has gone to bed, to-night, why not send for him—hurriedly call him up to your operating-room? Why not insist that he should come, before he has time to dress? The mere fact that he carries this receipt about with him on his person, as you said, shows how precious he holds it to be. But if he's caught off his guard in that way he might forget. You might

easily enough keep him there with you for ten or fifteen minutes!"

"You mean the chances are that he'll simply throw on anything that's nearest him—a blanket or a bathrobe, if it's late enough?"

"Yes."

"But there's the captain!" objected McKinnon. "There's the scene we went through last night."

"Then wait until the captain has gone to his cabin for the night. The later it is when you call Ganley the better. I can be waiting. The moment he has left his cabin, locked or unlocked, I can be there making my search."

McKinnon looked down at her, puzzled, not by her proposal, but by the sheer fact that she could make it. He began to feel that some kindred and companionable love for the casually adventurous linked them together; he began to realise that, for all her sex, she was not without her youthful and full-blooded relish for the hazard of any true game that was worth its candle.

"Suppose Ganley suspects something?"

"He can suspect nothing if we only do our part of it in the right way," admonished the youthful intrigante before him. "He lives in daily dread that you may receive messages about the Locombian uprising, or his own con-

nection with it. Then why not assume that a despatch has come in, one, for instance, stating that De Brigard and Ulloa have met, that this revolution about which you understand so little has actually begun? You have no suspicion as to who these men really are. It will only be natural for you to make inquiries. You might even be sending for further particulars. That would keep him in suspense: that would hold him there and give me the time I need!"

"But if he insisted on not waiting?"

She stood for a moment or two in deep thought.

"Then you would have to warn me."

"But how?"

Again she stood gazing at him with meditative eyes.

"Why not by the sound of your spark? You could start to send quickly. I could hear it quite plainly through the open port-hole."

"But even in that, again, is a risk. I might be sending to hold Ganley, and not to warn you."

They stood in thought for still another moment or two. McKinnon was not altogether unconscious of her presence, so companionably close to him. Until that day he had faced the isolation of the man who plans and fights alone. There was something vaguely consoling in the

thought of comradeship so unlooked for and yet so sustaining.

“Wait,” he said, as a sudden thought came to him. “I might send one word, a simple word like ‘*Go.*’ You could easily recognize it, then, as a warning. That would be simple enough, if you could only remember the Morse.”

“Would it be hard?”

He tapped out the dots and dashes with his finger-tip on the rod of brass from which the berth-curtains hung. She listened closely as he repeated them. Then she stooped and reproduced the signal with her own finger-tip on the wooden edge of her narrow berth. The light and alertness of her inquiring eyes as she looked up into his sent a quick and inapposite thrill of appreciation through McKinnon.

“That will be the danger-signal,” she agreed. “When I hear it I’ll understand.”

But McKinnon was held back by a sudden disturbing thought.

“Suppose Ganley himself is able to read the Morse?”

“But don’t you see that is impossible! He’s shown that already. He never would have come to you as he did when the *Laminian* was leaving New York if he had been able to stand on the deck and read your spark at the masthead, or if he had caught the sound from your cabin as

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you sent. All that talk of his was only to blind you to his real end; it was only to find out if he himself had been found out."

"But even if we have the good luck to get back this paper he's holding," began McKinnon, once more marvelling at the quick coherence of her reasoning, "that is only the beginning of things."

"Yes," she agreed, dropping her intent and troubled eyes before his steady gaze. "But why should we cross our bridges before we come to them?"

He still had to confess to himself that there was something almost enigmatic in that persistent yet febrile energy of hers. It was so vastly different from what life had taught him to expect from women whom the hardening years had not touched with bitterness and left old and wise. It seemed a contradiction of everything about her—her youth, her Aprilian softness, her obvious honesty of outlook, her childlike candour of face and character.

Intuitively, as she stood there studying his changing expression, she caught at the feeling that was still challenging and bewildering him.

"This is puzzling you—that a woman can face such things as this?" she demanded, with what was only a moment's hurried and unhappy smile. "But you must remember that I have

lived in the midst of such things for nearly three years."

"Were they always this bad?" he asked her, with an answering smile that unedged the solemnity of the question.

"No," she replied; "but all the while I was in Guariqui I breathed nothing but an atmosphere of intrigue and counter-intrigue. It was the same with my brother Arturo, ever since he went south to fight for father's claims. We talked and worked together often in Guariqui. It must have crept into my blood in some way, for even when I was away from it, even when I was safe and happy in New York, I wasn't altogether sorry when a Locombian planter's son, studying in the School of Mines there, came and gave me the first inkling of what was going on. I believe I was almost glad when I found Arturo needed me again, and needed me so badly. It appealed to something dominant in me; it made idling seem so empty and foolish. Then I found it was more than an escapade, a game—that it was a peril, and I couldn't stand off. I couldn't hold myself away from it a moment longer."

He moved his head slowly up and down as a sign of comprehension. His sympathy brought the fleetest shadow of a smile to her still troubled lips.

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"It's not that I like it," she said. "It's more that I can't bear to see anything that's near to me suffer undeservedly. I hate the thought of Arturo being dealt with so unfairly. It—it—Oh, I think it must be because my own father was a soldier himself!"

"I rather imagine I know the feeling," McKinnon told her. "I think I've carried the same fighting madness in my own blood for quite a number of years."

"But you're a man, and you're still young," she murmured, looking up at him a little sorrowfully, wondering at the touch of bitterness that had crept into his voice. "You do it from choice; I must do it from necessity. You can glory in it—it's unselfishness with you; it's the spirit of adventure. With me it's only selfishness—it's only fighting for my own."

"But isn't that enough?" asked McKinnon comprehendingly as he took her hand and turned away toward the door.

He could imagine nothing less militant and predaceous than that soft and birdlike warmth which lay for a moment between his fingers.

CHAPTER XII

THE BULL-BAITERS

MCKINNON waited until he knew Captain Yandel had turned in from the bridge. Seven bells of the first watch had already sounded mournfully out of the gloom of the dipping forecastle, and to wait longer would only add to the danger of the enterprise in hand. The wind had somewhat lessened, so that the seas on the *Laminian's* quarter were less thunderous than during the day, and comparative quietness reigned on the ship's upper deck.

McKinnon, as he stepped out and glanced towards the bridge, felt that this quietness was not without its touch of the ominous. Yet he quickly hooked back the cabin door and adjusted his helmetlike receiver. Then he deliberately pushed the call-button that summoned a steward from below. This done, he turned back to his operating-table, drew up his form-pad, and wrote a sentence or two on it, studiously knitting his brows as he decided on the name and

distances of the sending ship. Then the pencil once more flew over the form-pad. He did not look up until he heard the steward's repeated knock on his door-frame.

"Tell the passenger in stateroom eleven to come to the wireless-room," he requested. "Get him here quick, for it's important."

Even before the sleepy-eyed steward had turned away the operator had his 'phones once more over his ears. Then his eyes travelled to the watch lying on the table before him, and an increasing spirit of uneasiness both concealed and revealed itself in the studied and deliberate slowness of his movements as the minutes dragged away.

It was not until he caught the sound of approaching steps that he reached languidly out and swung down his switch-lever. He stood, then, in an attitude of studied preoccupation, waiting to send the "splash" of his blue-flamed spark out into the night. Yet the one sound that came to his anxious ears was that of slippers feet shuffling nearer and nearer to him along the deck. It was not a hurrying sound. There was no touch of anxiety or eagerness in the heavy and methodic tread, even as it entered his very cabin. Yet McKinnon knew, before he so much as looked up at the intruder, that it was Ganley who had come in answer to

his call. And he had to restrain a smile at the thought of how identical were the tactics adopted by both his enemy and himself.

"Well?" demanded the non-committal and titanlike figure as McKinnon worked his key for a preoccupied moment or two, switched off, and once more took up his earphones.

It was at least a minute before the operator deigned to look about. When he did turn, his first movement was a peremptory sign for his visitor to close the cabin door. Yet before the man with the 'phones had once more turned about to his key and closed communication with a studiously weak-powered "Good-night," he had made careful note of the intruder's figure. It suggested, as he had hoped, that of a sleeper turned unexpectedly out of his berth.

Ganley was still in his pajamas of braided Chinese silk. Over these he had thrown his great black raincoat. This he held together at the waist in an attitude incongruously feminine, though the operator could still see the fat, dead-white flesh where the sleeping-jacket stood apart beneath the pendulous and weather-darkened throat. There seemed something gigantically and incongruously Columbinelike, something shaming and over-intimate and repulsive in the waiting figure and its accidental exposure of dead-white flesh.

“Well?” the titanlike visitor draped in black once more demanded. He seemed to show no undue haste, no exceptional interest as he stood there with his great shoulders hunched impassively up. Between his fingers, strangely enough, he held one of his thick-bellied, short Hondurian cigars, as yet unlighted. He made a picture of guarded and judicial unconcern, a picture so complete that McKinnon stopped for a moment to admire it in secret. And every second that passed was a second gained. But the limit of delay had already been reached.

“You said you wanted to look over anything special that came in,” began the operator, laying down his ‘phones.

The Columbinelike giant in pajamas nodded his head.

“I’ve got news, big news,” McKinnon confessed. “Yet it’s not exactly about Ganley.”

He could see the other man’s eye-flash of impatience, but still the attitude of wary unconcern was not relaxed.

“Well?” was all Ganley ventured.

The man at the table, as he tore the written sheet from his form-pad, knew that he was being closely and keenly watched. This prompted him to toy with the situation for another moment or two, for he had his own watching to do.

"Do you know anything about this Locombian mixup?" was McKinnon's casual question as he peered momentarily down at the sheet in his hand.

"Not a whole lot," guardedly answered the man in the raincoat. "And what's more, I don't want to. They're all the same, those tropical revolutions; the same fireworks, the same brass bands, the same bad ammunition and gold braid and bombast, and the same eternal countryful of starving peons!"

McKinnon, watching him covertly and closely, was a little disappointed at his enemy's apathy. The red-rimmed eyes seemed to grow no more alert or alarmed, the heavy lips continued to chew the end of the unlighted and thick-waisted cigar. Yet time was slipping away minute by minute.

"I seem to have picked up pretty bad news from down there," began the operator, waving his message-sheet.

"You mean bad news for me?" mildly inquired the other, with a languid uplift of his shaggy, iron-grey eyebrows. The two men looked directly at each other for a silent moment or two. McKinnon had a twofold end in view, and his line of advance was not an easy one.

"There's been hard fighting in Locombia," he slowly asserted.

Again the pajama-clad figure merely nodded.

"I've picked up a Savannah liner bound north; she relays the news from an Atlas fruiter. They've got this revolution of Ganley's in full swing."

The speaker did not allow his eyes to stray from the other's face. Yet he could still detect no unusual betrayal of concern. Beyond the spasmodic and habitual working of the heavy iron-grey eyebrows, the huddled hulk of a body in the steamer-chair made no movement that could be interpreted as a sign of surprise.

"They report that the revolutionary forces under De Brigard met the government forces under Ulloa on Tuesday."

"Where?" asked the other, casually enough.

"It was twenty miles southwest of Puerto Locombia; De Brigard was convoying eight mountain-guns up towards Guariqui."

McKinnon stopped and waited. The other man slowly took his cigar from his lips and looked at the tattered end. Any current of emotion that may have been awakened in him remained shrouded and subterranean. Whatever he might be, concluded McKinnon, he was at least a consummate actor.

"Well?" the stolid and guarded figure de-

manded; and that was his only comment. McKinnon bent over as though to consult the message-sheet.

“They report that De Brigard has pounded his way through the Locombian lines and occupied Itzula.”

The other man sat down, with a scarcely audible sigh, in the broken deck-chair beside him. There was an appreciable space of silence, unbroken except for the breathing of the two motionless figures.

“Itzula!” at last purred the black-coated man, as though uncertain of the name. Then he peered down at his slippers toes for several meditative seconds, slowly stretching the gross legs clad in Chinese silk. McKinnon knew he was digesting his victory, but only to the initiated could the movement have been interpreted as the very core and essence of any such luxurious mental easement. Then he looked up and repeated the word “Itzula?”

Before McKinnon could realise it he was on his feet.

“One moment,” he called back as he crossed the room.

McKinnon caught up a message-sheet and intercepted his enemy at the door.

“I want you to see this dispatch,” he said, catching at the other’s arm and talking against

time. "I want you to understand what this 'Three-four-five-two—six Refunfuno' means. You'll see it here in the A B C Telegraph Code. It means 'Revolution broken out here.' I want you to see it for yourself. Then you'll know——"

"I'm taking your word for it, young man," retorted the other as he shook his arm free and started through the door. McKinnon knew it would be madness to try to hold him by force.

"What's up, anyway?" he asked instead, following the other out on the deck.

"I've got a map of that country down in my cabin," answered the huge figure in the Chinese silk.

"But we don't need your map!" persisted McKinnon.

"I guess we may as well find out where they're having all that fun we've had to miss," called back the other from the stair-head. And he was gone before McKinnon could get to his side.

The operator knew only too well what the man's return to his cabin meant at such a moment. He did not take time to determine in his own mind the cause of that return, whether his enemy had suddenly remembered his unlocked door and his unguarded papers, or whether

something had cropped up to arouse his suspicions.

But McKinnon, without a moment's loss, sprang back into his wireless-room and faced his switch-lever. He threw the ebony handle of his starting-box down across the contact-pins with a force that seemed almost to explode the dynamo into a roar of droning protest. It was like the burst and sound-rush of an ascending rocket. Then his hand darted out to his key and he broke and closed the great current, quick and strong, sending the huge blue spark exploding from his coils until it cannonaded through the closed cabin with a crash and throb like the quickened thunder-claps of a tropical storm. Madly he repeated the call, again and again, wondering, as he feverishly worked the key in that one brief word of warning, if he had been too late; praying, as the moments dragged away and nothing broke the midnight quietness about him, that the girl in the cabin below had heard and understood his warning.

He suddenly began to reprove himself as he stood there counting off the seconds, and listening to the interminable muffled throb of the far-off engines, for not thinking in time, for not holding Ganley back, even though it had to be by force. Or he might have done it, he felt, by the mere pretense of some fresh message

coming in. He might have kept him there for another precious five minutes if he had only acted as a man in his place ought to have acted. But he had missed his chance.

He crossed to his open door and paused there to listen. He knew that by this time Ganley was in his cabin, and that, unless Alicia Boyn-ton had caught the warning signal, she had already been trapped. This gross, malevolent, red-handed enemy of whom she stood in such fear must already have confronted and caught her. The mere thought of it was too much for him.

McKinnon started back to his cabin, remembering he was unarmed, thinking of the revolver that still lay in his trunk.

But something in the quietness of the midnight ship filled him with some sudden keener sense of impending disaster. Without the loss of another second's time he turned and darted below decks.

CHAPTER XIII

THE RECOVERED GROUND

IT took McKinnon but half a minute to reach the passageway that led to Ganley's cabin. He felt, as he paused for an instant before his enemy's closed door, that his entrance into the room before him involved a final and unequivocal betrayal of his own position. His line of advance from that time forward could no longer be the circuitous and subterranean one he had hoped to make it. The contest between him and Ganley, thereafter, would have to be open and aboveboard.

Then, preparing himself for the scene he was to face, he turned the knob and swung open the door.

The cabin was empty. The electric lights were turned on, the disordered berth stood before him, and Ganley's massive pigskin wallet lay on the floor. But the room was without an occupant.

McKinnon, now thoroughly alarmed, turned

and ran to the second door farther down the passageway. This door, he remembered, led into the cabin of Alicia Boynton, and for just a second or two he hesitated about entering it.

Then a great sense of gratitude welled up through him, for as he stood with his hand still on the knob the sound of the girl's voice came out to him. He had no time to resent the tumult and poignancy of this newer feeling, for it was the woman's words, and not her voice, that coerced him into sudden attention. "How dare you!" cried the voice beyond the closed door.

"How dare you come into this cabin!" she was crying. McKinnon could hear her gasp of what might have been either indignation or increasing fright.

"This is a little dose of your own medicine, young woman!"

It was Ganley who had spoken. His voice was still low and unhurried. It seemed almost casual in its studied deliberateness. Yet it held a tremolo of restrained passion that made the deliberating McKinnon wait there for a minute or two with his hand still on the door-knob.

It was Alicia Boynton's voice that sounded out of the quietness.

"How dare you!" she gasped again.

"Cut out that play-acting and stand back

against that wall there! So! Now hand out that stuff of mine—every line and rag of it!"

It was the woman who spoke next.

"I have nothing to hand out."

"I'll give you ten seconds," protested Ganley. "I'll give you ten seconds to get those papers of mine into my hand here, every shred of 'em!"

"I have no papers of yours," declared the more and more terrified woman.

"I'm no fool—I saw 'em—I caught you at it!"

"Will you leave my cabin?"

"Then explain what you've got stuck down your waist there!"

"It's nothing of yours."

"Hand it out, or I'll rip those clothes off your back!"

"There's nothing to hand out."

"Hand it out—or I'll *blow* it out!" came the low-toned threat, driven home with an oath.

"I can't," came the woman's answer, scarcely more than a whisper.

"*Hand it out!*"

Then came a second or two of unbroken silence.

"*You're going to shoot!*" gasped the woman. It was only too evident that Ganley had stepped closer to her.

"No," he said, his thick voice shaken a little with his close-held passion. "I'm not going to shoot. But I'm going to pound your lying head in with this gun-grip—I'm going to pound you till your own mother wouldn't know you!"

The woman uttered a little cry, not shrill enough to be a scream, not low enough to be called a moan. It was then that the waiting McKinnon swung open the door and sprang into the room.

He was barely in time to behold the infuriated Ganley, with his heavy black-handled Colt revolver held by its barrel, charge on the girl, who stood with her back against the cabin wall. He was not in time to prevent the blow that fell on the girl's out-thrust forearm, as blindly and instinctively she threw it up to guard her head. But as the clubbing gun-butt raised for its second frenzied blow the intruder sprang. As he sprang he caught the swinging revolver in his hand. One quick movement, one twist of the levering grip, wrenched it free. The next moment McKinnon's fingers were clamped on Ganley's fat and pendulous throat and he had the man in the black raincoat thrust flat back against the berth-edge, gasping for breath, pawing the air with his thick, fat hands.

"You hound, to treat a woman like that!" was all the overwrought McKinnon could say.

“Let me breathe, you fool!” gasped Ganley.
“Let me breathe!”

“You hound!” repeated McKinnon, thrown into a primitive and unreasoning passion of revolt against the brutality of the scene.

“I *caught* the she-cat—I *caught* her red-handed—I *caught* her coming through my door!” cried Ganley, getting his breath again.

“Are you hurt?” the operator demanded of the woman still motionless against the wall.

“No,” she answered.

“Then I’ll settle this with the gentleman myself, in his own cabin, or in the captain’s, if he prefers.”

But Ganley was on his feet at once.

“Nobody’s going to leave this room,” he declared with a gavel-like thud of an oath. “That woman’s lifted documents o’ mine that aren’t going to get out o’ this cabin.”

McKinnon’s less primordial instincts were slowly reasserting themselves. He looked from the one figure to the other, as though mystified by the case, as though uncertain of the charges being bandied back and forth.

“Who is this woman?” he demanded of Ganley with a sudden assumption of uncertainty.

“Who is she!” cried the exasperated Ganley. “I know who she is, and she knows I know!”

"Have you anything of this man's?" McKinnon deliberately demanded of the girl, realising that his intrusion had not yet amounted to a complete betrayal of his own position.

The upturned gaze of the girl against the wall and that of the wireless operator met. Ganley moved closer to the door, as though to guard it. No one spoke until McKinnon repeated the question.

"Yes," said the panting and puzzled woman, "I have something of his."

"What is it?" asked the operator.

"A slip of paper."

"Where is it?"

"I have it," was all the girl answered.

"Then hand it out to me," ordered Ganley.

Her eyes were still on McKinnon's as her hand went to her breast.

"No, hand it to *me*," interposed McKinnon as he watched the slowly withdrawn hand that held a crumpled sheet of white paper. The wide, troubled eyes of the girl turned from one man to the other. Then she opened the slip of paper and glanced down at it. Ganley's hand went out for it authoritatively. The look in McKinnon's eyes was equally imperative.

It was then that the girl fell back a step or two along the cabin wall. She held the paper between her hands, as she did so. Then, with a

quick movement of her trembling fingers, and before either of the men could stop her, she tore the sheet in two, again and again.

“I’ll *kill* you for that!” choked Ganley, his face contorted like a wrestler’s, shaking and twitching, but not moving from where he stood.

McKinnon, with the revolver still in his hand, stepped between them.

“There’s been enough of this prize-ring work,” he cried as he faced Ganley. “I want to know what all this means.”

“It means I’m going to get that woman,” panted the other man, his face still grayish purple with rage.

“How get her?”

“Get her in irons, where she belongs.”

“I stole nothing,” interrupted the white-faced girl.

A stab of inapposite remorse went through McKinnon as he remembered that he himself was the cause of this last and unlovely scene.

“She lies!” Ganley was saying.

“Hold on there!” said McKinnon, getting a firmer and firmer grasp on both himself and the situation. “I came into this cabin and found you beating a girl over the head. Say what you’ve got to say about it. Then the girl can say what she has to say.”

Ganley stared at his self-appointed judge.

"Are you the master of this ship?" he demanded.

"I'm the master of this situation," calmly replied the wireless operator with a pregnant upthrust of the revolver which he still held in his hand. "And before our little party breaks up I'm going to understand what it means."

"Then ask this woman what she stole from me."

McKinnon had to feel and test his way as he went, like a man on thin ice.

"You mean for the woman to speak first?"

"Yes," retorted Ganley; "and she's going to do more than speak."

McKinnon turned to the woman, who stood still staring at him in unbroken and puzzled silence.

"Well?" he said at last.

"What must I explain?" she finally asked, still studying his face.

"What you carried out of my cabin," answered Ganley.

"You want me to explain that?" she asked, her eyes on the younger man's face.

"Yes," answered the operator.

"Must I tell you?" still parried the perplexed woman.

"You must," McKinnon replied.

"It was the contract made between this man

and the wireless operator of this ship," she deliberately answered.

"A contract?" said McKinnon.

"It was the agreement you signed to become a partner of this man."

"And you tore this agreement up?" demanded McKinnon with an assumption of incredibility. He waited for her glance of intelligence to show him that she had caught some vague inkling of his position, of the attitude of armed neutrality he was struggling to retain in that strange tangle of interests; but she did not seem to understand.

"You saw me tear it up," she replied, wondering in turn just what was expected of her, anxious not to endanger him by any foolish misstep on her part.

"Why?" asked McKinnon.

"I could not see any one tied to a man whose hands are stained with blood."

Ganley laughed a heavy and mirthless laugh, as though resenting the theatricality of the woman's phrase.

"That's a hell of a reason!" he mumbled in his sullen guttural.

"I did it because I know what this man is," went on the woman, turning her slow and puzzled stare from the operator to Ganley.

McKinnon, now in perfect control of himself,

wheeled about to the Columbinelike figure in the black raincoat and the Chinese silk pajamas.

"You are Richard Duffy, acting with the Consolidated Fruit Concern and the authorities at Washington for the capture of a man named Ganley, are you not?"

"I am," answered the man in the raincoat, doggedly facing the young woman. McKinnon could see her lip pucker up with its little curl of unspeakable scorn.

"The man lies!" said the girl in her calm and deliberate tones. "This man is Ganley, 'King-maker Ganley,' himself!"

The man in the raincoat once more laughed his sullenly derisive laugh. His contemptuous defiance seemed to nettle and anger the woman into more coherent thought. When she spoke next she uttered her words more incisively, more quickly.

"This man," and her scorn was infinite, "is the buzzard of the tropics, the creature who waits and watches over sick republics, who prowls about after dying governments to pick their bones!"

"You're crazy!" scoffed the man she was accusing.

"He's called 'Kaiser Ganley,' the gun-runner, 'Pasha Ganley,' the agent of every Central American patriot," she continued. "He's the

fighter who never comes to do his own fighting. He's the man who sucks his living out of a blinded and ignorant people's gun-wounds."

"She lies!" declared Ganley, blinking up at McKinnon indifferently, as though to note the effect of her words on him.

"He drugs these simple-minded people with war talk and blinds them with the glitter of a little gilt braid," went on the woman, with increasing bitterness. "Then he turns and robs them. And there he is, the colleague, the *intimado* you have found, the man who made a tool of Juan Parra and murdered him or had him murdered in the swamps of the Magdalena, the man who was given twelve hours to make his way out of Brazil, the man that even Zelaya refused to stand by. He is the upholder of the weak who shipped twenty-five thousand rounds of ammunition into Locombe, embedded in lard, and twenty-eight hundred carbines crated and invoiced as laundry equipment, and nine cases of dynamite that went out of Mobile as land fertiliser for the Costa Rican coffee plantations."

The man in the raincoat, who had been squatting contemptuously on the berth-edge, swung forward to his feet at this. His many-lined, heavy, red face had lost its colour until it remained only a faded brick-dust tint.

"You see!" cried the woman more tumultu-

ously. "He even confesses it is true. It surprises him that I should know so much. But there are other things I know. I know that he was the instigator of the Orinoco Colonisation frauds. I know he was once a Cuban blockade-runner, and once an agent of Don Carlos, the Spanish pretender. I know that he was a gun smuggler into the Balkans at the same time that he was being made a pasha by his friend, the Sultan of Turkey."

She paused for breath and pointed mockingly at her enemy's short, thick fingers as they slowly clenched and unclenched.

"Look at his hands and you will see! He went to Lhassa in the pay of a Russian secret agent. And they caught him and crucified him on one of their convent walls—they nailed him there through the hands. You can see the marks! He can't lie *those* away, for he hung there twelve hours until a tribesman set him free and spirited him across the frontier. And this is the great soldier who gave you money——"

Ganley once more broke in on her as she stopped to pant for breath.

"These are a pack o' lies!" he cried, and his voice was rasping and forced, as though it required a great effort for him to utter the words. "These are all damned lies!"

The woman pointed to the little particles of white paper scattered about the floor.

"And that was not an agreement with this man?" she derisively asked.

"This man made an agreement with me, an open and honest agreement."

"Honest!" interpolated the scornful woman.

"And he had the right of saying yes or no to it. He's past the age of being wet-nursed into what he wants to do."

"Then he had the right to know what he was tied up with," parried the scoffing woman.

"He still has the right of saying yes or no to that agreement," declared Ganley as he brought his great, russet-coloured hand down on the berth-edge with a sudden blow. "But what's he to you, anyway?"

She looked from one to the other of the two men before her. But McKinnon gave her no chance to reply. The moment he had been waiting for had already arrived.

"I've had enough of this," he said as he held his hand out towards the sullen-faced Ganley. In this outstretched hand was a roll of bills held together by a rubber band.

"What's this?"

"It's your money!" said McKinnon.

"I won't take it!" retorted the other.

"You won't take it?"

"Not until you show me a reason why we should split." He jerked a contemptuous thumb towards the staring woman. "And I don't call *that* a reason!"

"The whole thing's too tangled up for me," equivocated the operator.

"There's no tangle when it's pared down to the truth."

"But we can't argue about that all night, and I've got my key to attend to," complained the watchful McKinnon.

A new look of anxiety flashed across the other man's face at the mention of the key. It was a flash, and nothing more.

"Then you believe what she says?" asked Ganley more soberly, looking from the paper-littered floor to the woman still standing motionless against the cabin wall.

"You haven't disproved it," said the operator with a gesture of simulated bewilderment.

"I'm proving and disproving nothing," was Ganley's reply. "I haven't been doing the talking. I'm not the talking kind. But I've come into touch with this kind o' woman before. I know her, and she and her whole gang can't hoodwink *me!*"

"Well?" said McKinnon a little impatiently.

"Oh, I've known her ever since she hitched

up with that crooked little concession hunter called Boynton."

"Stop!" cried the girl.

"For three years now she's been a feeder for that one-lunged climber, that Yankee renegade who's been trying to pose as a Spaniard. They're the team who went down yonder with a cooked up claim on the Cornruche Rubber Treaty territory."

"Stop!" cried the indignant girl, more shrilly. The scene in some way reminded McKinnon of a meeting between a cat and a mastiff. More and more he grew to resent the fact that this fragile and isolated figure should be dragged through such demeaning mires of scurrility. But Ganley was not to be stopped.

"And when they'd wrung their money out of that," he declared, "they dished up a Locombian nitrate claim and drained that dry. And when that was picked clean they wheedled their way into Duran's good graces. And then, to cinch her graft, this woman, this pink-and-white beauty right here before you, married a Santo Domingan half-caste filibuster who'd made a half million out of brandy smuggling and counterfeiting!"

CHAPTER XIV

THE PYRRHIC VICTOR

A wave of something that was vaguely disheartening, that was almost nauseating, swept through McKinnon. It left him momentarily dazed, as men are dazed with that forlornest sickness which follows a seismic upheaval. He felt as though the deck under his feet had opened and let him down into the depths of a chilling sea. Insidiously and almost unwittingly he had grown to believe that this unbefriended and lonely woman was in some way very close to him. Little by little he had come to accept the hope that they might draw even closer together, that the exigencies of warfare might make their paths identical.

But as he stood listening to Ganley's thundered declaration there swept through him the impression of being engulfed and suffocated in fogs of duplicity, of being entangled in endless webs of lies and intrigues and counter-intrigues. He felt suddenly oppressed and disturbed by a

sense of unlooked-for and undefined conspiracies beyond conspiracies, of bewildering and inscrutable forces at play all about him.

“Is this true?” he demanded of the woman before him.

His question was almost a prayer for its own denial. He could see that the scene through which she had passed had sorely taxed her strength. She was no longer a girl, but a woman who had known and confronted life.

“Is this true?” he repeated, and even as he asked it he felt that whatever part she might be playing in that crowded drama he would in the end be compelled to stand by her.

“No,” whispered the woman, white to her lips. “It is not true.”

“Have you a husband?”

“No,” she still answered in her low voice. The monosyllable was emotionless, yet he could see by her face that she was suffering.

Ganley laughed outright. It was not a pleasant laugh.

“And you never married a mangy, half-caste diamond-wearing Santo Domingan named De Perralta?” demanded the man on the berth edge.

“I married a man named Perralta,” answered the woman slowly, her unwavering eyes on Mc-Kinnon as she spoke.

“Then it is true?” A note of involuntary bitterness rang through McKinnon’s sharp query.

“Yes,” she answered.

“But you have just said you had no husband!”

“He was dragged from the carriage half an hour after the ceremony.”

“What ceremony?”

“After our marriage. I have not seen him since that day. Seven weeks later he died of yellow fever.”

“And tell why he was dragged from that carriage,” prompted Ganley, with his guttural and mirthless laugh, as he saw the woman’s wide eyes watching him closely, almost challengingly.

“He had shot the wife of a government official named Gurmanito, in Bogota,” she answered in her listless monotone. “That was only one of other things.”

“Other things which made him almost worthy of the family he’d married into,” interpolated the scoffing Ganley, in luxurious appreciation of her misery.

McKinnon could see that she was shaking, that her whole body was quivering. When she spoke again, hurriedly, her voice was higher in pitch, as though the strain upon her was becom-

ing a tension she could no longer control or endure.

"I have never spoken of these things," she said in her tremulous soprano, facing McKinnon, "but I want you to understand. It was three years ago, when I was little more than a schoolgirl. I was under a great debt of gratitude to this man who—to this man Perralta. I had been left in care of the American Consul at La Guayra; I had taken an English steamship to Venezuela, after two years in a French school. I was to re-embark from La Guayra for Puerto Locombia, but quarantine was established on account of bubonic plague, before I could get away. I had to live at the consulate on short rations—the American consul had refused the demand of the Venezuelan Government for a certificate that La Guayra was free of the plague. He and his family were taken off by a United States gunboat, the *Paducah*, and I would have been sent to the detention camps, had it not been for this man Perralta."

"Go on!" prompted the other, as she paused. "He seemed a gentleman then, and had money and influence. He played his part well. He leased a seagoing tug and had me and my companion, a young German woman, carried out of the infected district. After we had passed the necessary period of quarantine, for

observation, in the English hospital at Georgetown, he was there, waiting for us. I was weak and ill—I think it was of coast-fever. He bribed or bought over the German woman, I don't know how. I was tricked into a ceremony I did not understand. I scarcely knew what to do when I found out. But it was decided for me—he was dragged from the carriage as he sat beside me. I tell you all this because—because I want you to understand."

"I do understand," answered McKinnon.

"And is that all?" asked Ganley, with his careless sneer.

"Yes; that is all," she answered. The insolence of the gross-limbed gun-runner was like a whip-lash to McKinnon.

"And is that all on your side?" he asked, with a sudden movement of disgust.

"Not by a long shot!" retorted the man in the raincoat, with unlooked-for energy. "I want later history than all this. I want to know just what this woman's got of mine."

"She has explained that she took this paper," replied the other, pointing to the littered cabin floor.

"What do I care what she said, or says, or is going to say. You've got to show me—I'm from Missouri!"

McKinnon pondered the situation. It was

plain that Ganley had regained his self-control, that he could no longer be counted on to act with the unthinking directness of the outraged savage he had seemed.

“There’s a very simple way to settle this problem,” McKinnon suggested. “We’ll lock this cabin, so nothing in it can be interfered with. The three of us will step into your cabin. You’ll then go through your belongings, these documents and papers of yours, and I’ll check them off as you do so, one by one. It will be easy enough to tell then if anything is missing.”

The proposal aroused no enthusiasm in Ganley.

“This is not the hour o’ night I care to go into the general-auditing business,” was his reply.

“Nor altogether the hour of night for keeping a young lady out of her bed!”

Ganley peered at the speaker for several seconds before replying.

“I like to see you being nice and considerate,” he said at last, with his mild and studied laugh. “And I imagine you enjoy being judge and jury in a case like this. And I also imagine, just because this woman’s flashed her lamps at you a couple o’ times, that you’ve got an idea that *she’s* all right and *I’m* all wrong. You’ve both concluded that this little talk-fest

has settled the whole case. But it hasn't. And I guess it's not going to."

He rose to his feet heavily and slowly and thoughtfully, and then turned to McKinnon.

"Remember, I'm not trying to hold you in any way. You're free. You can do what you like. But if anything unexpected should happen, just bear in mind I gave you a chance to stand in with me, and you wouldn't take it!"

"Is that a threat?" asked McKinnon.

"Threats? Why should I make threats? Talking's cheap, and there's been a good deal of it handed round here to-night. And, as you say, we've rather tired the lady."

There was no longer any trace of mockery in his voice as he drew himself up and spoke more directly to the younger man.

"And now I'm going to turn in. But don't you forget that I'm still trying to be a friend o' yours!"

"I know it!" said the younger man, meeting his eyes without flinching.

"Then there's nothing we need to worry about," declared Ganley. And before the other quite realised it the man in the black raincoat, with a benevolent and all-forgiving arm-wave, crossed the room to the cabin door. No one spoke as he passed out through it and closed it after him.

It was the watching and motionless woman who finally emitted a little gasp in which anger seemed to override astonishment. Her companion was startled by the look of bewilderment, mounting almost to open distrust, that crept slowly over her face. There seemed to be something akin to pitying contempt in her eyes as she slowly turned about and gazed at him.

“What does this mean?” she demanded.

“Does what mean?” he parried, disturbed by the hostility of her gaze.

“The way you have played into Ganley’s hand—the way you have sacrificed everything for your own safety!”

“But nothing has been sacrificed,” persisted the unhappy McKinnon.

“I have been sacrificed—you have watched him humiliate me—you have helped him to humiliate me!”

“It was hard to bear, I know. But it could not be helped. It’s a part of the price we have to pay for our victory. It’s a part I would have borne myself, a thousand times over, if I’d only been able.”

“The price for what victory?” she demanded.

“The victory we wanted; the thing we’ve been working for, all along. It’s settled—and he doesn’t even understand it’s settled!”

“Yes; it’s settled,” she echoed, unhappily.

“But this leaves us free!”

“You do not know this man as I do,” was her answer.

“But it’s over—we’re through with him!”

“*He* is not through with *us*!”

“But what can he do, when once I’ve got in touch with the *Princeton*?”

She looked about the small cabin, from side to side, forlornly. It was the first time McKinnon had seen actual fear in her eyes. He even felt that she had been vaguely weighing the place’s possibilities against assault.

“Are you afraid?” he asked, not comprehending the source of her distrust. She shook her head in negation.

“This is an American ship,” was her answer.

“Then what is it?” he asked, oppressed by some new-born isolation of spirit that barred and walled him away from her.

Again that look of almost contemptuous pity crept into her eyes.

“I’m afraid of *you*,” she replied; “I’m afraid of the future, and how you will surely fail.”

There was no sign of tears in her eyes, though he had felt, from her voice, that an outburst was imminent. Yet he found it hard, cruelly hard, to meet her open and unwavering glance.

“Why have you treated me like this?” she asked him, almost without emotion. “Have you nothing to say, nothing to explain?”

McKinnon did not answer for a moment or two.

“I can’t explain,” he said, at last, his face distorted, under the strong side-light, with some unuttered misery of spirit.

CHAPTER XV

THE LULL IN THE STORM

It was not until the *Laminian* was well down off the coast of San Salvador that she rode into settled weather. Then, in a night, she seemed to emerge from a world of wind and unrest and tumult into a world of brooding quietness. As she crept on, forging ever southward under the high-arching azure sky, this sense of quietness and completion grew deeper. The air became warm and soft. The sun streamed down on the patched awnings, on the worn deck that seemed bone-white in the flat, strong light of noonday. Through the ventilators, all day long, came the purposeful throb and beat of the engines, muffled, like the throbbing of a great heart. There seemed something inevitable and ordered in that unhurried and undeviating pulse, as though the ship and all she carried were forever at peace with the world.

A passenger or two moved slowly about the level decks or sat listless in the dark shade of

the canvas, listening to the plaintive hiss of the ship's bow as it parted the turquoise sea into two widening simitars of curling foam. Cinders rained gently down on the slowly flapping awnings, on the bone-white deck boards steaming with sea-water sprayed from a leaking hose in a foolish effort to keep their cracks from widening, on the eddying and milk-white trail behind the threshing screw. From somewhere forward the bells sounded out, lazily, sadly, ghostlike, as though recording time in a world where all things slept. The ship's brasswork flashed and burned in the hot light. From the silence of the bow, at times, came the sound of a calling voice, mournful and measured. Naked-shouldered stokers, blanched and wet with sweat, crept out to the mid-deck rail and let the draft that alleyed along the companionways cool their moist skin. Now and then a flying-fish rose and circled away, off the bow, and fell shimmering back into the turquoise sea. Piloting the ship's cut-water, ever raced and dodged a band of porpoises. Now and then a creeping dorsal fin cut the surface of the water and slunk away again. It seemed to impart something ominous and sinister to the unrelieved brilliance of the arching sky. It left the oily and unruffled sea menacing and cadaverous-like in its calm.

The ship crept on, the centre of its circle of

water overhung by its circle of sky. Along the flat fringe of this sky were ranged low tiers of cumulus clouds. They seemed as fixed and orderly as the clouds on a painted stage-drop; they stood like floating flecks of cotton, making a circling amphitheatre of the lonely sea. And in the ever-shifting centre of this amphitheatre throbbed and pulsed the thing of flashing brass-work and bone-white decks, of sadly flapping awnings, of quiet men with watching and melancholy faces, of a world complete in itself. As the long afternoon waned and the sun dipped behind the orange-red sky-line and the light passed away, the orderly and sentinel lamps were hung out. Along the pitted side-plates writhed blurred lines of phosphorus. The sea became a circle of inky blackness furrowed by two ghostly lines of foam. The sky melted into a maze of velvet and lonely light-points. Along the shadowy hatches sat and crooned vaguely outlined groups of seamen, and from somewhere below decks rose the sound of string-music, mournful, outlandish, touched with mystery, as the lonely ship and the huddled lives she sheltered drifted farther and farther southward.

The outward sense of peace that brooded over the *Laminian* was not shared by certain of her passengers. Alicia Boynton, after a feverish

night and a day in her berth, emerged from her cabin a little paler than before, with a soft hollow of anxiety under either cheek-bone. But otherwise she showed no sign of the ordeal through which she had passed, or of the chaos of uncertainty which still confronted her.

McKinnon's own nights, since Hatteras had been left behind, had been equally unsettled. His restless and broken sleep was disturbed by dreams wherein he thought he was engulfed in burning quicksands, and held fast there, when he ought to be at his key. The more he struggled and raged to reach his instrument, just beyond his touch, the more firmly the engulfing quicksands seemed to hold him. Then troubled visions of firing-squads and blindfolded prisoners of war would run through his brain, of dark-skinned little soldiers in ragged denim shouting *bravas* to a beautiful woman in navy blue, of imprisonment in a small and fetid *quartel*, or huge, red-handed conspirators and drunken and cursing ship-captains. In his waking hours he was oppressed by a continued sense of suspended action, like that ominous impression which creeps over a ship when her engines stop in mid-ocean.

The drama about him seemed at a standstill. But only too well he knew that this suspense was for the time being alone. It was not peace

into which they were drifting. Things had gone too far for a long-continued armistice. And the longer a truce was maintained, McKinnon felt, the more decisive would be the final action. Events were merely framing themselves for that ultimate surprise which he was hopeless to forecast. He was oppressed by the feeling of vague conspiracies being enwoven about him. What these conspiracies were, he could not even guess.

His one escape from this wearing sense of arrested action lay in his key and recorder. At all times of the day he worked busily at his apparatus or brooded patiently over his tuner and coherer. Morning, noon, and night he remained on the lookout for any word that might creep in to him. And all the while he kept calling, doggedly, hoping against hope to get in touch with the *Princeton* or at least to pick up some stray ship or station. He came to feel something forlorn, something poignant, in his repeated calls, fluttering out and dying away unanswered in those vague etheric wildernesses between a lonely sea and a lonely sky. They seemed to endow the wandering ship with a pathos like that of a lost ewe crying alone and unheard in the night.

Ganley's own attitude made this waiting game a still harder one. He sauntered about

under the *Laminian's* gently flapping awnings, smoking his flat-bellied Hondurian cigars, as placid and unperturbed as a commodore pacing his own yacht deck. He accosted McKinnon, from time to time, with the off-handed geniality of long-established comradeship. He appeared to have buried all memory of those scenes in which he had taken such a recent and such an active part. He divulged nothing of the plans which were fermenting behind the bulwark of his low and massive frontal bone. He said nothing of the doubts and uncertainties, if such he had, which were preying on his mind. But all the while McKinnon felt that he was being watched, just as all the while he himself was guardedly watching the other.

Once, as McKinnon stood alone at the ship's rail, Ganley sauntered over with his ponderous and deliberate strides, and joined him in his silent study of the star-strewn heavens. The operator waited, feeling that at last his enigmatic enemy was about to speak. But the gun-runner's meditative eyes remained turned up to the stars, soft and warm and luminous against a sky of velvety blackness. He seemed utterly at peace with the world and his own soul, as McKinnon left him there, contemplating the intimidating vast dome of the tropical heavens.

It was only as the *Laminian* rounded the

eastern coast of Cuba that McKinnon detected any signs of unusual interest in the gun-runner's actions. He caught sight of him at the rail, shadowed by one of the life-boats, scanning the shore-line through his binoculars. He could see him there for an hour or more, studying the long, grayish-yellow littoral land-shelf and the lonely and misty blue hills beyond it. He stood there, expectantly, as though in search for some signal which was not to be found. Then he fell to walking the deck, impatiently, between the engine-room skylights and the life-boats. McKinnon, as he watched him striding back and forth, with a touch of exasperation out of keeping with his customarily ponderous movements, could see that a little of the colour had gone from his pendulous cheeks, and that his deep-set eyes were more haggard and puffy than usual.

But nothing came to the quiet and sun-steeped ship to relieve McKinnon's accruing sense of anxiety. His coherer wooed no response from the silence about him; his aerials intercepted no answering message. More than once he felt tempted to confront his impassive and quiescent opponent, if for nothing more than to end the strain, to knock the chip off his shoulder and bring things to an issue.

But Ganley gave him no opening. And again

there crept through the younger man, as the second long and sultry day ended in a black and star-strewn evening, the feeling that he was friendless and alone, far from his own kind. With the coming of the calm and spacious tropical night there came to him a more compelling sense of his isolation. More keenly than ever he felt the barrier that his own dissimulation had built up between himself and Alicia Boynton. There was a barb of mockery, he felt, in the very manner in which he had been compelled to relinquish a friendship that had promised to mean so much to him. He tried to tell himself that a man must fight alone, in warfare such as that he was facing, that he must learn to accept his loneliness as a natural part of the game.

Then, of a sudden, his isolation seemed a thing of the past. For, looking up as he sat crouched before his tuner, he saw a figure standing at his open door. And it did not take a second glance to show him that this figure was the figure of the woman of whom he had been thinking. The moment he caught sight of her, in her low-throated gown of white linen, he felt the subjugating influence of her presence. His heart began to beat faster, even before she stepped in across his coppered door-sill. He felt grateful for her companionship, for her

mere presence there. He noticed the restlessness of her brooding eyes as she sank into the broken-armed steamer-chair that he placed for her. He wondered just where the thread of their old intercourse would be taken up again.

“Are you in communication with anything?” she asked, with an anxious glance at his apparatus. Her tone was tentative and non-committal; it left everything still unanswered.

“No,” he said.

“You can’t get anything?”

“Nothing whatever,” he answered, “though I’ve been calling regularly, twice an hour.”

“And not a message in two days?” she asked.

“Yesterday afternoon I picked up a few words from an *Atlas* liner, bound north. She seemed to be reporting distances. But I couldn’t get enough power; my coils weren’t strong enough to reach her.”

The girl rose to her feet, and crossed the cabin and stood studying the faded map of the Caribbean on the closet door.

“But aren’t there chances of still getting in communication?” she asked. “There are so many ships, nowadays, that carry wireless.”

McKinnon rose and stood beside her, regarding the map.

“Yes, there are hundreds and hundreds of ships, but, on the other hand, there is so much

ocean, so much distance to swallow them up," he explained, indeterminately feeling that the longer he could hold her there the more firmly the tie of their old companionship would be re-established. "Look at this map, for instance, with all these islands that seem so terribly close. In the Bahamas alone there are three dozen good-sized islands, and over six hundred cays, and nearly twenty-five hundred rocks of one kind or another. You'd imagine, to look at them on the map here, that you'd hardly get a ship through without bumping into one of them. But when you're down here actually cruising among them, going days without a glimpse of land, you realise how far apart they actually lie. And it's the same with ships. It's possible we may not get another call all the way across the Caribbean."

"That means the *Princeton* won't be at Puerto Locombia?"

"Not unless I can pick her up."

"Then it's hopeless!"

"I can't say the case is hopeless," parried McKinnon. "But the chances are against us. All we can do is wait and be ready. Sometimes, on clear nights like these, we can make wireless carry a surprising distance."

"There must be somebody—some ship!" persisted the girl, as she sank into the chair again.

He began to wish, as he watched her, that it lay in his power to bring some touch of contentment to those unhappy and anxious eyes before him.

“We’ll surely overhaul the *Princeton*,” he had the hardihood to assert, “if she’s lying to anywhere in the neighbourhood of Culebra.”

“And if that fails?” asked the girl.

“I’m hoping we’ll still be able to pick up Puerto Locombia itself,” he ventured.

She shook her head meditatively, absent-mindedly.

“There is no station at Puerto Locombia.”

“No station?” cried McKinnon.

“It will be dismantled—most likely it will be burned to the ground by this time. If De Brigard is fighting his way up to the capital, he would never leave a coast-station behind him, to be calling for help.”

Here was news, indeed, thought McKinnon; and a sudden grateful look leaped into his eyes, as he realised the misstep from which she had saved him.

“Can you remember if there is a telegraph-line between Puerto Locombia and that capital?” he asked, after a moment of deep thought.

“There was one, once,” answered the woman. “But their poles rotted down in less than a year—the heat and rain and insects of that climate,

you know, will make a log as high as your table crumble away in one season. So the government brought in a shipload of street-car rails, I think they were second-hand rails from Kingston, and planted them for poles to carry the line up to Guariqui. But the natives kept cutting out sections of the wire for their own use, to mend saddle-girths and tie up hut-wattles, and it took three-quarters of Arturo's government troops to patrol the route and keep the line open. So they gave it up, at last, and fitted up the three wireless stations."

She did not join in McKinnon's laugh over the untimely end of Locombia's telegraph-system.

"Where is the third station—the one besides Guariqui and Puerto Locombia?" he asked.

"At Boracao—that's the biggest of the banana-shipping towns."

"It's hard to have to sit and wait for—for the inevitable this way," he said, with an assumption of cheeriness.

"Yes, it is hard," she said, out of the silence that once more fell over them.

He felt, none the less, wordlessly grateful for her presence there, talking or silent. She seemed to bring a new and more vital atmosphere into his squalid little station. She seemed to throw a warm and transforming tint on

everything about her, as he had seen a rose-tinted stage-light alter and enrich the canvas and tinsel of a Broadway playhouse.

He saw her take a long and troubled breath, look up at him, and once more look away. The hum and whir of his electric fan was the only sound in the cabin.

“I don’t think either of us has been quite honest with the other,” she said, compelling herself to meet his puzzled gaze.

“I know—and I’m sorry,” he replied, puzzling her again by his note of humanity.

“I’ve told you an untruth,” she said at last, taking another deep breath.

“In what way?” asked McKinnon.

“I lied to you, when Ganley and you were in my cabin. I can’t let it go on. I can’t endure the thought of this lie standing between us like—oh, like a quicksand that can never be crossed.”

“But what is it?” asked the other.

She looked up at him again, very steadily and very bravely.

“I told you that my husband was dead,” she answered in her low and constrained voice.
“He is not dead.”

“He is not dead?” echoed McKinnon.

“I said that he died of yellow fever. He took the fever and was ill with it. But he did not

die. He was sentenced and sent to the Island of Malpanto, on the Pacific coast. The Locombian penal colony is there. He was sent there, for life. He *was* dead, to all the world—he was dead to me."

"Then he *is* dead, to all——"

"Wait. I wanted to make sure of my freedom, to be foolishly sure of it. So I went North. Then I went to New Orleans, to my old home."

"But why?" he asked, as he noticed her hesitation.

"A felony, in Louisiana, is a cause for absolute divorce."

"You mean you were set free in your own country?"

"Yes, that is why I went to the United States. That is why I was there when the news of this revolution first reached me."

"And Ganley knows this?" McKinnon demanded.

"Ganley knows everything," she answered.

"And this is why you are so against him?"

She had to school herself into self-control before she could go on.

"I have a better reason for being against him. If he and his Liberal Party once acquire power, Ganley will bring Perralta back to Guariqui; he will commute his sentence. He will do this to strike at my brother Arturo."

McKinnon looked at her in amazed and silent comprehension. At last he seemed able to understand, disturbed as he was by the thought of so fragile a figure entangled in such brutal and rudimentary conflicts. The lack of motive for her presence in the same circle with Ganley, whether facing or following such a man, had been the underground yet actual cause of more than one of his wayward suspicions. But now he understood. And her confession, instead of shocking and disturbing him, brought into his softened eyes a sense of release, of more perfect understanding. What she had told him seemed to humanise her, to bring her into touch with the world of realities as he had met and known it. The last of his old-time fear of her, his hampering awe of her, had vanished.

“We are both against Ganley,” he said, as though speaking to himself.

“*You* are against Ganley?” she questioned.

“To the end of time!” he answered, with a solemnity that brought her great wondering eyes up to his. She noticed that he rose from his chair and closed the cabin door.

“Why have you changed?”

“I have not changed!”

“Then what is it?”

“It’s that I’m at last going to be half honest with you—that I can’t continue not being

honest with you! I am on this ship for the same purpose that you are here."

"To go to Locombia?"

"No—to defeat Ganley!"

"For what reason?"

"For *your* reason!"

"But for whom?"

"For the Minister of War of the United States of Locombia," answered McKinnon. He leaned towards her a little as he spoke, and lowered his voice, with a warning side-glance towards the closed door.

"But my brother Arturo is the Locombian Minister of War," she maintained, her eyes still wide with wonder.

"And for two months past I've been commissioned by your brother to keep in touch with practically every so-called 'Liberal' expatriate in New York. And only twenty hours before this ship sailed I found out what it carried and why it was necessary for me to be on board of it."

For a full minute she did not utter a word.

"Then you are a spy?" she said, at last.

"Scarcely a spy—I am merely a Secret Agent for Arturo Boynton's government," was his answer.

He could see the deep breath she took as she

leaned relaxingly back in the broken-armed steamer-chair.

“Then we are acting together,” she murmured, slowly, still a little mystified, still a little sceptical as to this new issue which was reuniting them.

“Yes, we’re acting together—and we’ll never let Ganley win!” said McKinnon.

It was something more than the fire of foolish ardour. And the woman at his side must have seen and known it, for a touch of colour came into her pale cheek. The electric fan purred and hummed on its little bracket. The soft and balmy night air beat on their faces. The gloom and quietness of the ship was about them.

“Won’t you let me fight this fight out, *for you?*” he asked, surrendering to the tide of feeling that seemed tearing him from all his old anchorages.

“If we only could!” she said, inadequately.

“We can, together,” he cried, with blind and unreasoning hope, resenting the look of something that seemed strangely akin to pity as she gazed up at him.

She did not answer, in words, but some slowly transforming emotion, some inner and unuttered capitulation slowly overbore the look of trouble that weighed upon her. Then she closed her eyes, as though shutting out some glimpse

of happiness too great to be anything but a mockery. Before she opened them McKinnon had her hand between his great bony fingers, and reckless fire and warmth and daring went singing through his veins.

“I’m going to fight this out for you,” he said, “and I’m going to win because you want me to win!”

“Oh, it will be hard!” she murmured, with a *vibrata* of something that was almost happiness in her voice.

“Hard!” he cried, in his new-born and unreasoning audacity; “I’d fight through Hell itself for you!”

CHAPTER XVI

THE VERNAL INVASION

GANLEY, togged out in a loose-fitting and many-wrinkled suit of white duck, was pacing the *Laminian's* bridge-deck, like a polar bear pacing its cage.

He watched the morning sun come up, bright and brazen, like a newly minted penny. He watched the aerials bridging the mastheads and waiting like a seine to net any wandering school of æolian notes. He watched the bare-footed sailors sluice the steaming deck-boards. But most of all he watched the sky-line ahead, with many ruminative uplifts of his heavy iron-grey eyebrows.

It startled him a little to see McKinnon emerge from the deck below, fresh from his early bath in a rusty iron tub that had long since parted with its porcelain, whistling like a sand-boy as he climbed the brass-plated stairs.

He emerged from the stair-head in a suit of fresh linen, clean and cool-looking, as chirpy as

a city sparrow at a fountain-rim. It even disturbed Ganley a little to behold him so causelessly and so mysteriously happy.

But what more seriously disturbed the guardedly watching man was the trivial discovery that McKinnon took a key from his pocket as he approached his station door, that he inserted it in the lock and turned it before he gained admittance to his narrow operating quarters. It obviously meant that, for some reason or other, the wireless-room was thereafter to be kept under lock and key.

McKinnon himself knew there were more reasons than one for that early morning mood of his. It was not the mere thought that he could now claim a definite and dependable ally which brought his lightheartedness back to him. It was more the consciousness of that new *camaraderie* which must exist between him and Alicia Boynton, the promise of close and subtle companionship with a young and lovely woman whose interests were to be his interests. It was the realisation that at last duty and desire had been made one.

He found something wordlessly consoling in the fact that as the long tropical morning wore away he could look up from his tuner and phones and rest his eye on the white-clad figure of the girl, not a stone's throw away from him.

It was understood that they were not to meet openly. But he knew, as he looked out at her from time to time, and saw her lying idly back under the patched awnings of the bridge-deck, apparently engrossed in a book, that she was quietly coöperating with him in keeping a watch of their common enemy.

The first-fruits of this quiet espionage was the disturbing sight of Ganley making his way to Captain Yandel's stateroom.

What took place there it was impossible to tell. All that Alicia could be sure of was that he remained for half an hour with the ship's master. For the past few days, she suspected, this thick-necked and bullock-minded officer had been more than ever under the influence of liquor. Alcohol, apparently, only served to crown his sullen taciturnity with an animal-like ferociousness when interfered with or even accosted. That silent and friendless man, she knew, was not one to be easily won over. He had neither the brains nor the ambition to disrupt the even tenor of his oxlike days by affiliations with anything so disquieting as a revolution-maker. He was not open to a gun-runner's *negocio*, or he would surely have played his hand earlier in the game.

Yet there was something terrifying to her in the mere fact that Ganley could remain closeted

with that autocratic functionary for so long, whether the time was being spent in bribe-passing or in imbibing *aguardiente* flavoured with Jamaica rum and dried mint-leaves.

Her fear fell away from her, however, when she saw Ganley come out of the stateroom door again. His face was dark and troubled, and to the guardedly watching woman his tread seemed heavy and spiritless.

She explained the episode to McKinnon, an hour later, when he casually strolled below and slipped unobserved into her cabin, as they had arranged.

“I don’t think even Ganley could placate a beast like Yandel,” explained the operator. “It would be like trying to wheedle yourself into the good graces of a grizzly. And he’s been drinking—drinking abominably. It would be worse than trying to pet a boa-constrictor. He knows how to navigate a ship, and that is all.”

“But if Ganley should put the whole case before him, and make the bribe a sufficiently big one? Suppose he waits until the last, and then simply buys him over?”

McKinnon shook his head.

“He’s not the buyable kind, or he would have been bought before. And then he’s *against*

everything—he simply lives by fight and friction and opposition.”

“But think of his power!”

“I don’t think we need to, when we remember he’s nothing but a whisky-tippling and saturnine misanthrope.”

“Still, couldn’t he be bought over, if the bribe were made big enough? As big as Ganley could afford to make it?”

“I don’t pretend to knowledge as to what a man will do when he’s tempted enough,” answered McKinnon, as he fixed his absent and studious eyes on the troubled woman. “But something instinctively tells me Captain Yandel is not going to be our danger-point.” He was silent for a moment or two, for her question had sent his ever-active mind off on a new tangent.

“I must be the one to temporise with him and keep him guessing until it’s too late!”

“But it would only make things worse, in the end.”

“Could they be any worse?”

“Perhaps not, but can you expect Ganley to trust you now?”

“I don’t think he quite understands, yet. And I’ll go to him and give him back his revolver. It’s no use to me—and I’ve noticed he carries a second gun.”

"But you, yourself?" interposed his companion. McKinnon touched his pocket.

"I've had to carry this, now and then, even before this trouble. But we can't lose anything by keeping in touch with him. And there's always the chance of my wireless picking up something."

"Suppose Captain Yandel has spoken to him of the scene in your room?" asked the girl, apparently disturbed by some new thought.

"Which scene?"

"When you told him I was your—your wife," she explained, with heightened colour.

"I'm sorry I had to stoop to a trick like that," said the other, with unexpected humility.

"It will make it so much harder, later," she ventured.

"I'm sorry," was all he could say. Her face suddenly coloured with a deeper flush at the thought that he had misinterpreted her.

"By *later* I mean all that we may have to go through before we are off this ship."

"Then escape from this ship is to be counted the end of everything?" he asked.

"No, no;" she murmured, "the beginning."

"Could it be the beginning I am hoping for?"

She drew back from him and looked about her, as though she had suddenly reawakened to their immediate surroundings.

“Neither of us has the right to hope, until we are free.”

“But we will be free—we are free!”

“Not until we have escaped from Ganley and all he stands for.”

“Ganley, then, is our first bridge,” he cried, with sudden energy.

“Yes—our first bridge!”

“Then before we cross that bridge I’m going to test a girder or two!”

CHAPTER XVII

THE PROFFERED CROWN

THE *Laminian's* wireless-operator sat in his room, three hours later, with his door hooked back against the wall-plates and his window-curtains gently flapping. From its unpainted shelf droned and hummed his dry-battery electric fan. A seaman passed by under the awning, carrying in his hand a cluster of deck-lamps. From the open ventilator-heads came the discordant sound of steel shovels grating on steel, the occasional slam of a furnace door, the throb and pulse of the unvarying engines. Otherwise it was very quiet; sea and sky met in a world of unbroken peace which the passing of so incongruous a thing of steel and steam disturbed for only a moment, agitated foolishly, yet for only a heart-throb or two.

Then high above the quiet deck sounded out an even more incongruous noise, the nervous, tense staccato of the wireless "spark." It seemed like some underworld god of speed

striking out titanic chords; it was like some ghostly fingers playing on a harp of haste. McKinnon sat between his four flashing white walls and sent his Hertzian waves arrowing out over the lonely acres of the Caribbean, hurling his coil's mysterious and imponderable force against the engulfing isolation of the sea. Then came a space of silence and again the blue-coloured sprite danced and jigged at the mast-head.

As McKinnon had secretly hoped, that sustained rattle and roar of his "spark" brought to his open door the huge and white-clad figure that had been meditatively pacing the bridge-deck.

"Could you take a message for me, if you're in touch with anything?" asked Ganley from the doorway.

The operator put down his earphones and motioned for the other man to enter.

"I thought I had something then," he explained, "but it's only static breaking through!"

"What's static?"

"Lightning-flashes, somewhere beyond the skyline. I can hear 'em go like a roll of drums that bend up to what we call a cough or sneeze."

"Perhaps you're not in good running order," ventured Ganley, eying the apparatus as a

street cat might eye a canary behind its cage-bars.

"It's working as smooth as oil," answered McKinnon, adjusting his receiver again and listening for a minute or two. "But we're too far away from things. We're drifting too far away from a white man's world."

Ganley sat down with his slow and ponderous deliberateness. McKinnon found it hard to say just what he wanted to say, for the weight of their last encounter was still heavy on his spirit.

The other man seemed to understand the source of his embarrassment. He sat back, at last, and diffidently remarked: "You had something to say to me?"

McKinnon reached a long thin arm over to the back of his operating-table.

"Yes, I'd forgotten to give you back this gun of yours," he said, as he held the revolver out to its owner.

Ganley took it, diffidently, turned it over in his fingers, puckered his heavy lips, and casually dropped the gun into his side pocket. Then he looked up at the other man.

"That was pretty ugly talk you got about me the other night," he began, sliding low in his chair until his attitude was nothing more than a nonchalant lounge. "I suppose you swal-

lowed it whole—everything that attractive young woman said?"

It cost McKinnon an effort to hold himself in, but the only line of procedure in warfare such as this, he had learned, was the indirect one.

"I don't believe everything I hear," was his answer, as he assumed an equally indifferent position.

"I guess most stories 've got their two sides," remarked Ganley, largely.

"This woman, though, claims you're nothing more than a gun-runner," the younger man carelessly reminded him.

"Well, *I am*," suddenly declared Ganley, with his little deep-set eyes squarely on the other man's. "Can't there be two sides to gun-running?"

"The law side and the outlaw side, I suppose," suggested McKinnon.

Ganley stared at him, a little heavily, a little impatiently, as the beetling iron-grey eyebrows worked ruminatively up and down.

"Look here, son, I want you to understand this situation! These *bodega*-hugging, labour-loathing fire-eaters down here have got to have their theatricals. And you've got to have somebody set the stage and supply the coloured lights

for 'em. And if one man doesn't tote in the fireworks, another damned soon will."

"And toting in the fireworks is your business?"

"That's my business! I keep supplying them with the nicest little pin-wheels that money can buy. They've got to have 'em, no matter where they come from. So I'm keeping their show going, and I'm making them pay for it good and plenty."

"You only supply the fireworks?"

"Not always; but ain't even that enough? It's revolutions and revolution-talk that run their cafés—for you'll notice these little distractions always start in the cities, where there's plenty of *vino blanco* and spare time. There's not a republic down there that's able to eat right, if it hasn't got a boundary dispute to take up its spare time, or a *junta*-fed patriot to keep handing out rebel proclamations. They live on 'em. And I keep their vaudeville going for 'em."

"But hasn't this particular calling its particular dangers?" McKinnon casually inquired.

"That's part of the game! There are even men down there who'd go so far as to call me a lawbreaker. If that's what I am, I'd like to know what you'd call those Yankee concession-hunters and wire-pullers and bribe-givers who

burrow around for underground contracts and then run squealing to Washington like a stuck pig every time a peon slaps a banana-car with a machete! No, sir, that's my market, and I'm going to hold it. I'm going to climb onto that Guariqui gang's pay-car and hang the *completo* sign over its dashboard!"

"But isn't this man De Brigard getting there ahead of you?" ventured McKinnon, watching for the effect of that softly exploratory probe.

"I guess I'll be in time for a little of the fun," answered Ganley, guardedly. The other was compelled to acknowledge there was something primordially massive about this uncouth Caribbean king-maker. There was something titanic and persuasive about this self-confessed filibuster of petty republics. His very audacity was a ponderable asset. The sheer force of the man could still appeal to some substratum of romance in the other's none too emotional state of mind.

Some trace of this feeling must have shown itself in McKinnon's half-smiling glance, for a new confidence crept into the tones of the man so closely watching him.

"I've been in my tight holes," he placidly declared, folding his arms over his great chest. "And I've got out of 'em, every time, just as I'm going to get out of this one!"

"But where's the hole, this time?" mildly inquired the operator.

"Not bein' dead sure I've got you on my side," said his candid enemy.

"But you *have* got me!" protested the other.

"Then why haven't you been sayin' so?"

"I can't say so, *openly*! I've got to watch myself and go slow," equivocated McKinnon.

"But what's the use o' falling between two stools? Why not swing in with the right side, nip and tuck, while you've still got the chance?"

Ganley was on his feet by this time, standing over him.

"See here, you're no piker. You're quick, and you're clever.

"You're not afraid of a big thing, just because it *is* big. I've got my wires laid, and I'm going to knock that Locombian government off its feet, if it costs me half a million to do it. I'm goin' to blow it higher'n Gilroy's kite. They've got chromium-mines down there worth more'n a million. I'm going to clean out that Guariqui gang and I'm going to do it good when I do it. That's *my* country down there," and he waved a great apelike arm toward the southwest, "and a week from now'll see it made into a white man's land."

McKinnon peered up at him, wondering if by

any chance the man had indeed persuaded himself of the justness of his cause.

"I tell you you've got to swing in with us," Ganley was blandly declaring. "You haven't any show. This work is going to be done quick and done quiet."

"But how about leaks?"

"There's not going to be any leaks. I've got my plan for that."

"What plan?"

Ganley laughed his short and mirthless laugh.

"A little plan to keep things quiet. The one and only thing we don't want is interference. It's our fight, and once we win it there'll be no trouble. We're a nation then, damn it, the New Liberal Party. We're a government of our own, and we can go back and patch up outside quarrels when we see fit."

"But what will you do with the *Laminian*? How about our captain, for instance?" McKinnon asked.

"I'll give him more than *aguardiente* to worry over!" declared the gun-runner, with a snort of contempt for that saturnine ship's master. "Oh, I've got this thing figured out as close as a sum in arithmetic. Some night this week our men are to surround their little two-by-four capital. Tuesday morning, by day-break, if our guns and stuff are all landed,

they'll begin to cannonade. By Tuesday afternoon we'll be advancing on the Palace itself. By Wednesday night we'll have Duran and his gang shelled out or our own men shoved in. By sun-up on Thursday we'll have Duran deposed and the new government declared, an hour after those Palace gates come down, with our own men in office. There's no use my beating round the bush with you any longer. It's all got to come. And I don't want you workin' against us. I know you're game enough; and I like your style. I don't want to see you cuttin' your own throat. And if you see us through for the next two or three days I'll do the right thing by you."

"How the right thing?"

"I'll deed you over a third interest in the Parroto chromium mines, and make you Minister of Telegraphs for the new republic, with a salary of six thousand dollars in gold!"

Some momentary spirit of romance, of vast issues and strange dangers, of hazards and risks in far-off corners of the earth, seemed to hover about the hot and stuffy little cabin.

"I mean it," went on Ganley, as placid and persuasive as before. "I'll tie myself down to it. And that hill-town of Guariqui is going to be a mighty livable little city when we do it over!"

"It's not Guariqui I'm afraid of," was McKinnon's evasive answer. He was thinking, not so much how some spirit of youth and adventure less sophisticated than his own might be stunned and intoxicated by such prospects as these, but just how he was going to discover Ganley's undivulged plan for keeping Puerto Locombia clear of all outsiders.

"Then what are you afraid of?" demanded Ganley.

"It's so *big*," complained the other. "So big for me, I mean!"

Ganley laughed, a little scornfully.

"Then take a day or two off and get used to it. Sleep on it, and let me know how you feel about it to-morrow or next day. Is that satisfactory?"

"Anything you say," McKinnon answered.

The other man rose heavily to his feet, crossed slowly to the door, and turned back to stare absently about the crowded little room.

"You'll be with us all right," he said, without emotion.

But instead of going below, after bidding the operator good-night in his suave and deep-throated guttural, he slowly and meditatively paced the bridge-deck, idly blinking up at the stars above the mastheads and out over the rail at the dark sea on either side of them.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE COAST OF MISCHANCE

IT was two days later that the *Laminian* swung in toward the coast of Locombia. Her rust-stained bow, under the lash of the sweeping trade-wind, lifted and dipped again in a sapphire-coloured sea streaked with yellow wind-rows of drift-weed. The hot sun blistered the painted woodwork; the air was like a back-draft from an opened furnace.

The wind freshened, as the day wore away, whipping spray along the bleached decks and humming through the tight-strung aerials at the masthead. It brought with it occasional driving showers that pelted on the sodden canvas and steaming woodwork.

McKinnon, in his cabin, laboured in vain over his tuning box and responder. He had held Ganley off for another few hours, hoping against hope that something might still be picked up. The gun-runner had not accepted this enforced delay with a good grace; there

could be little more hope for quibbles or equivocations in that quarter.

McKinnon, stooping to overlook his dynamo, felt that he had at last reached the end of his rope. The *Princeton* was still beyond his call.

When he stood up again he mopped his face with a handkerchief, and irritably summoned a steward and for the second time sent down to the engine-room asking how he was expected to operate his coils on less than a hundred volts.

Then he once more adjusted his helmet-receiver and sat back and sighed, letting the hot current from his electric fan play on his face. But the tropical air seemed devitalised, bereft of its oxygen. He was dimly conscious of the passage of time, of the muffled and monotonous drone of the fan, of the casual ship-noises far below deck. But nothing came to stir his responder into life. There was not a ship or station to be picked up. The day had deepened into evening, and nothing had come to help him solve his problem.

Already, on the ship's bridge, the navigating officer in soiled duck had picked up the Toajiras Light. Behind that light lay the flat and miasmal Locombian coast. And somewhere, still farther to the southwest, armies were being arrayed against each other. Somewhere, across the deepening night, men were ambushing and

shooting. Peons dragged out of peaceful valleys, "volunteers" commandeered at the point of the bayonet, unattached citizens forcibly seized in cafés and the open streets, were being set at one another's throats, because it suited the plans of a placid-eyed and lethargic conspirator who wrung power and money out of the optimism of a deluded and childlike people.

McKinnon, as he sat in his hot and stifling station, wondered if his mission had failed. He asked himself if he had not been outmaneuvered, from the first.

The weight of this seeming failure grew heavier and heavier on his spirit. He felt as though every dead body in that Locombian warfare was pressing down on him, as though the blood from every gunshot wound was submerging him in a river of self-hate.

He turned back to his apparatus, sullenly, wearily, desperately. But call and tune and call again as he might, he could get nothing. He wondered if, by any chance, Duran and his government were already a thing of the past; if the *Laminian* and all she carried had come too late; if Guariqui had already fallen. Then he mopped his face again, and told himself that the heat had got on his nerves. Any one, when tired and half-cooked, he muttered, would feel dispirited.

He pulled himself together, with an effort, and coerced his attention on the instruments before him. The thing was not over, he doggedly maintained; he still had his fighting-chance.

His watch above the responder was interrupted by a peremptory rattle of his cabin door. He was, at Alicia's suggestion, keeping his wireless station under lock and key, though it had long since slipped his mind that he had locked himself in. He opened his door, guardedly, and was both relieved and disconcerted to see the figure of Captain Yandel swaying there.

“What’re you picking up?” demanded the captain, thickly. His face was an almost apoplectic red, and a heavy odour of brandy drifted into the close little cabin. Yet the squat, wide-shouldered figure stood erect and steady enough on the ludicrously short and wide-planted legs. McKinnon wondered how many years he would last, in such a climate. Then he marvelled at the thought of how slowly men were able to kill themselves; the sheer pertinacity of life amazed him, as he peered up at the hulk before him, and in some way knew that it would drag on and on through its sottish years, that the overheated blood and the hardening arteries and the long-abused body would clamour for

their own, would fight for life and movement, to the bitter end.

"I haven't picked up anything," answered the thoughtful-eyed man at the operating-table. "And I've been hugging this coherer for four hours."

"Can't you get that dam'd Puerto Locom-bia operator?"

"I can keep calling."

"Well, keep at him till he answers. I want to know what they're doin' with that tin-horn republic o' theirs. And as soon as you get anything let me know."

He turned away, looked up at the night, swayed a little, slowly regained his equilibrium, and wandered forward to the darkness of the bridge.

McKinnon's hand went out obediently to the switch, his dynamo purred and hummed, and he caught up the lever-handle of his key. The great blue spark exploded from the coils and leaped and hissed from knob to knob across the spark-gap. "Pt-Ba," "Pt-Ba," he called, perfunctorily.

He looked up to see the restless captain back at his door again, stupidly watching his spark. The operator knew he was calling a dead station, but he played out his part.

"I might do something, if they'd give me a

little more power from that engine-room," he said, by way of excuse.

"Then you'll get your power," declared the autocrat of his little world. "You'll get power enough, if that's all that's wrong," he repeated, as he made his way once more toward the bridge.

McKinnon switched off and waited until Captain Yandel's order had time to be acted on. Then he tested his spark again. The eruption, as the contact-points of his despatching-key came together, seemed to stab and tear a sudden hole in the silence. It roared and cannonaded out through the little cabin, until the night echoed with it; it spit and hissed from the mast-heads, aggressively, incisively, as he continued to move the contact-lever up and down, slow and strong, and sent his call arrowing out through the darkness: "Pt-Ba," "Pt-Ba." But interpolated between each call for "*Puerto Locom-bia*" was an equally impatient and anxious Morse prayer for "*Cruiser Princeton—Cruiser Princeton.*"

"That's almost enough to wake the dead," he mentally assured himself as he adjusted his "set," switched off, and pressed the phones close in to his ears.

Through these phones, as he listened, came a sound as feeble and minute as the tick of that

insect known as a death-watch. His first thought was that it could be nothing more than a mere "echo-signal," from too high intensity. His second thought convinced him that this was out of the question; too long a time had elapsed between his own send and those coherent dots and dashes creeping into his startled ear. It was an outside message, a call being intercepted by his antennæ. Yet the signal that he was reading was the same as his own "Pt-Ba," "Pt-Ba."

McKinnon's hand once more darted out to his switch, and his face was alert and changing with his changing thought as he caught up his key-lever. And again the blue spark exploded across the spark-gap, and the cabin walls threw back the lightning-like flash and pulse of the illumination. Already he had forgotten the heat, the depressing sense of frustration, the brooding consciousness of impending defeat that had weighed upon him. Switching off, he sat with inclined head, intently, raptly listening.

He was startled to feel a huge and ape-like hand suddenly take hold of his arm.

"What're you getting?" demanded the owner of the arm.

It was Ganley standing there close beside him. His dark face, wet with perspiration, shone in the strong side-light as though it had

been oiled. His peering eyes showed in two thin crescents of white, out of the heavy shadow made by the projecting eye-bones.

“Nothing,” was McKinnon’s sharp retort. “I’m only *trying* to get something.”

He shook the detaining hand from his arm, and gave all his attention to his call. But the intruder was not to be so easily overridden.

“*Are you with us?*” he demanded, pregnantly, as the preoccupied operator again caught up the phone-set.

“Yes—yes, I’m with you,” cried the man, stooping over the responder. “But I’m trying to operate!”

“What in hell does this operating count if you’re with us?” persisted the placid-toned Ganley, determined, apparently, on a policy of obstruction.

“It’s this call that’s going to save both our scalps,” was the abstracted yet hurried retort.

“How save *my* scalp?” demanded Ganley, with a detaining hand on the other’s fore-arm.

The stooping McKinnon straightened up and wheeled on him, every nerve ready to snap like an overstrained bowstring.

“I’ve got to catch this call! Don’t talk—*keep away from me!*”

Ganley looked at him heavily. He did not speak. But a third voice thundered abruptly,

and unexpectedly through the hot cabin. It was Captain Yandel's, belligerent, stentorian, bull-like.

“Come out o' that station!”

The man addressed did not move.

“Come out o' there and stop interferin' with my men!”

Ganley turned his head slowly about and gazed at the ship's master. But otherwise he showed no sign of having heard.

“Are you comin' out o' there?” demanded that apoplectic-faced officer, in a roar of inebriate and affronted authority. There was no evading his blind and unreasoning anger. Ganley shrugged a massive shoulder.

“Since you ask me so politely, I s'pose so,” he conceded, with his mirthless laugh. Then he placidly turned about and stepped to the doorway, and from the doorway to the open deck.

“Now you get below-decks where you belong!”

The gaze of the two men met and locked; it was like the clash and lock of elk-antlers.

In that interlocked gaze lay animal-like challenge and counter-challenge, threat and counter-threat, malignant fortitude and an even more malignant defiance.

Ganley, with a lip-curl of contempt, thrust

his hands slowly down in his pockets, and then turned on his heel and went below.

“What’re you gettin’?” Captain Yandel demanded of the man chapleted with the shining band of steel ending in two small black knobs.

“They don’t answer!” cried McKinnon, with a gasp of exasperation.

“Don’t answer?” demanded the captain.

“No, I’ve lost them!” was the bitter cry of the man bent over his coherer.

The ship’s master’s blasphemy was both prolonged and voluble.

“And you ain’t goin’ to get ‘em?”

“I’ve lost them,” was the repeated and almost hopeless answer. The morose-eyed officer peered at the operator’s drawn and sweat-stained face.

“You’re makin’ a devil of a nice mess o’ this business, between you!” he declared, with another oath of disgust.

The wireless-operator only stared at his instruments, silently, challengingly, combatively.

CHAPTER XIX

THE INTERCEPTED CALL

It was two hours later that a great wide-shouldered figure in white duck passed quietly along the empty bridge-deck. This ghost-like figure cautiously tried the door of the wireless room, but found it securely locked. Then it crept about to the half-open shutter and stood there, minute after minute, in an attitude of listening. Beyond the unbroken drone of the electric fan there was nothing to be heard from within. And the cabin itself was in utter darkness.

The man at the window waited for still another space of time, peering back and forth along the deck to make sure that his movements were unobserved. Then he raised a cautious arm and slid the barred shutter farther along its groove.

The damp wood rasped and stuttered a little, for all his caution, as he pushed it, and he drew quickly back from the window. For he had heard the sound of a sudden half-articulate

sigh, followed by the stir of a body moving impatiently on a mattress, and then the quick pad of bare feet crossing the cabin floor.

It was McKinnon, startled out of his sleep of utter weariness by the momentary sound of the moving shutter.

He turned on the single-globed, green-shaded electric that swung low over his operating-table. He stood there in his crumpled madras pajamas, looking dazedly and a little sleepily about the narrow room.

Then, automatically, from sheer force of habit, he adjusted his "set" over his head, swung a sleepy hand out to his tuner-levers, pressed the phones close over his ears, and listened.

He grew tired of standing there, half-leaning against the sharp table-edge, as he listened, for the responder had given no sign of life. So he dropped into the chair before his instrument, and sat there, yawning sleepily, with ludicrously wandering eyes, his elbows spread wide and resting on the edge of the unpainted pine board.

The man at the shuttered window could see his face, half in the strong light of the shaded electric globe. He could see the bony hand move back and forth to the tuner and shift and re-shift the buttons in the slotted box-top columned

with numerals. He could hear the operator's low mumble of disappointment as he lifted the "set" from his head, disarranging more than ever his already tousled hair. Then the listener drew closer, for a sudden little sound, half-grunt, half-cry, had broken from McKinnon's lips.

The phones were once more held down hard on his ears as he stooped forward, this time wide-awake.

The coherer had stirred and quivered into life. A faint and febrile little shower of ticks was pounding minutely against his ear-drums. Some one was "sending."

He reached out and drew up the form-pad before him as he listened. The call was coming clearly now, repeated again and again. "Pt-Ba," "Pt-Ba," came the query through the night. McKinnon, as he listened and "tuned up" to the other man's tensity, could recognise the nature of the "send" as one would recognise the accent of a Westerner in Boston or a Londoner in Dublin. It was the unmistakable yet undefinable inflection and cadence of a navy man. It was an American battleship of some sort, calling Puerto Loconbia.

McKinnon was on his feet again, tingling with excitement. He threw down his switch-

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lever, caught up his key, and sent the answering call rattling and exploding across his spark-gap, loud above the purr of the wakened dynamo.

Then he turned again to his phones and listened. They had not tuned up to him; they had not picked him up. For still again came the call "Pt-Ba," "Pt-Ba." It was out of the hours for sending. The engine-room had diminished his power, leaving him without voltage enough to make a "splash" that would reach the war-ship.

But his hand went out to his form-pad and he bent over it, busy with his transcription, as the noise pulsing and creeping in through his receivers translated itself into intelligibility.

This is cruiser *Princeton* lying off harbor of Torreblanca. Send word of Guariqui situation. Mobile despatch two days ago reports protection wanted for American interests. Please instruct our consul send immediate advice.

LIEUTENANT VERDU.

Then came a minute or two of silence, and then the call again, followed by the repeated message:

PT-BA: Are you asleep? Why does *Princeton* get no answer?

LIEUTENANT VERDU.

And still again came the silence, and still again the call, indignant, peremptory, to the appreciatively trained ear as eloquent of impatience in its microphonic dots and dashes as the human voice itself could be.

Automatically, McKinnon wrote out the despatches, word for word, as a matter of record.

His chance had come at last: all he now needed was power. It would take him but a minute to slip down to the engine-room, he concluded, as he threw on a striped green bath-robe with a hood like a monk's cowl. Then he could see for himself that they were sling-ing the right voltage up to him.

He sprang for the cabin door, unlocked it, and swung it open. As he leaped out across the door-sill he ran head-on into the arms of Ganley.

He scarcely looked up. His one thought was to reach that engine-room and to reach it without loss of time. He accepted the momentary obstruction as nothing more than a clumsy sea-man who had scarcely been given time to step aside. He struggled to edge about the unyielding bulk, swinging to one side with a preoccu-pied half-growl of impatience. It was not until he found himself seized and almost carried back into his cabin that he saw either the meaning or the menace of the situation.

“Is that message for me?” demanded Ganley,

his huge figure blocking the doorway, his glance on the top sheet of the form-pad.

“No!” was the quick retort.

Ganley reached back and swung the cabin door shut.

“I’d like to glance over that message,” suggested the man by the door. His tone was soft and purring, but there was a suggestion of claws behind the velvet.

“This is only ship’s business,” explained McKinnon, in an effort at appeasement. Yet he quietly ripped the written sheet from the pad, his spirit of latent obduracy now well stirred into life.

“Could I look over that message?” repeated Ganley, as quietly as before.

There was no mistaking the threat in his voice. McKinnon, eying him, saw his hand drop down to his side. The movement was quick and casual. But when the hand was raised again it held a revolver, a heavy, forty-four caliber thing of blue gun-metal, with a sawed-off barrel. The worn corners of the metal glimmered disagreeably, in baleful little touches of high-light, as Ganley held the barrel low, close in against the other man’s startled body.

“What’s this for?” asked McKinnon, his skirmishing thought frenziedly exploring the

future, seeking for his next move and his reasons for it.

“It’s for *you!*” was the quiet yet sinister answer.

“But what’s the good of fool by-play like this?” protested the other, still wondering where his chance was to come in.

“Could I look over that message?” reiterated Ganley, with no trace of excitement in his voice.

The eyes of the two men met; they studied each other for a second or two of unbroken silence. Then the operator flung the sheet on the pine table before the other man. The situation allowed of no further equivocation.

“Read it, of course—if you want to!”

Ganley pounced on it, like a cat on a cornered mouse. He backed away to the door, but kept his revolver still poised in front of him while he read.

McKinnon, as he watched the gun-runner calmly restore the sheet of paper to his table, saw the chance he had at first hoped for slip past him.

“Don’t you think we’d better kill that message?” Ganley suggested with a pregnant movement of his right hand.

“Why?” asked McKinnon. He was still trying to think, to gain time.

“You know why,” retorted the gun-runner.

The operator looked at his apparatus, at the sheet of writing, and at the opponent who had his heel on the neck of the situation. Then he laughed in the purely passionless way of the man so submerged in bitterness that fate can bring him no further sting.

"I don't see why," he answered, still clutching about for some forlorn straw of deliverance.

Ganley came a step or two nearer.

"I'll tell you why," he said, drawing his gravely interrogative eyebrows closer to his flat nose-bridge.

"I've decided to be up here on this deck of yours to-night—it's going to be more comfortable than that cabin of mine."

"That'll only get Yandel down on you again!" parried the other.

"Mebbe it will—but seein' this is our last night at sea, I'm going to enjoy it. And the sound of any message, of any message whatever, going out on those wires up there, is going to spoil my night! Is that plain enough for you?"

He put the revolver back in his pocket and waited. The operator did not answer him. He knew that all he could do now would be to grope forward slowly and blindly; he could only crawl and test and wait, like a crustacean with

foolishly waving feelers. Ganley, watching him, backed toward the door.

"I'll not say good-night," he purred, with mock affability. "If you're still in doubt about anything, you'll find me on the deck here all right!"

The operator watched him as he went through the door and as he wheeled about for one malignant and admonitory stare into the cabin. From the depths of his soul McKinnon resented that smile.

"*You own this ship?*" he asked, with a quietness that might have disturbed a less intrepid spirit. From that hour forward, he was beginning to feel, dissimulation would be useless.

"No, but I'm going to," was Ganley's placid retort. He had taken out one of his evil-looking thick, black cigars, and was proceeding to light it with the utmost leisure.

"And this is *your* apparatus?"

"And my particular little corner of the earth," responded Ganley, with the studiously voluptuous satisfaction of the idealist who has achieved his dream.

McKinnon's eyes narrowed. The taste of being beaten at the only game he knew how to play was growing very bitter in his mouth.

"And supposing I can't kill this message?" he ventured. Had the words not been in the

form of an interrogation, they might have been claimed to carry the weight of an ultimatum.

The huge, red-faced figure with the black cigar leaned in through the narrow doorway.

“I think you will, though,” was the vaguely menacing retort.

“And why?”

Ganley laughed a little.

“Do you s’pose I’m going to let a couple of children like you”—and he threw a world of contempt into the word “children” as he uttered it—“step in and try to stop *my* steam-roller?”

“You haven’t told me *why?*” mildly inquired McKinnon, more and more becoming master of himself again.

“Well, this is why,” said Ganley, and he leaned closer in through the door as he spoke. “If you don’t choose to put a padlock on that wire, I’m going to put a padlock on *you!*”

“Just what does that mean?” was the quiet-voiced inquiry.

“It means that you’ll kill that message, or *I’ll kill you!*”

Then Ganley shut the cabin door, quietly, and the operator was left standing alone in his station.

CHAPTER XX

THE LISTENING ALLY

McKINNON was aroused by a quick, light knock, repeated for the second time. He took up his revolver, slipped it into the loose side pocket of his bath-robe, and cautiously opened the door.

It was Alicia Boynton who stepped in as he did so, pushing him sharply back and closing the door even more sharply after her.

Then she stood confronting him, with her finger to her lips, as a sign for silence. McKinnon had long since learned that great moments seldom accord with their setting, that catastrophic seconds are often wanting in ceremonial. His first impulse had been to warn her hurriedly away. Yet it was not the danger that surrounded her, but more the thought of his attire and its simplicity that disturbed and shocked him. His embarrassment, even at that moment, was greater than that of the calm-eyed girl's.

“What is it?” asked the operator, nettled by the intent look on her listening face.

She made a second sign for silence. Then she took a deep breath of relief. For the first time he noticed that she was fully dressed, as though for land travel. Something about her conveyed to him the passing impression that she was as disconcertingly well-groomed as she was incongruously at ease. Her face, under the heavy upturned veil, still carried its inalienable touch of youth and vigour, for all the anxious shadow about the eyes, which scarcely betrayed the fact that she had been passing troubled and restless nights.

“I have heard every word,” she explained, in her low and intimate tones.

“Then you know what a mess we’ve made of it!”

“I was leaning on the rail, under the bow of the life-boat,” she went on, disregarding his exclamation. “I waited until Ganley passed behind the officers’ quarters. He’s walking up and down, smoking—and waiting.”

“Did he see you come in here?” asked McKinnon, distressed at the thought that here was no hospitality and no harbour he could extend to her, feeling that this fight was his own, and his alone.

"No; he did not see me. It was so hot below—I had been sitting on deck for an hour."

"You must go below!"

"But this means so much—to-night. I should be here, with you!"

The calm impersonality of her declaration seemed to clear the air like a thunder-clap. McKinnon knew but one moment of wavering.

"I'd rather you went below," he found himself saying, at the very moment that he felt most grateful for her presence there.

"Why?" she asked.

"There is going to be trouble here," he warned her. "You *must* go!"

"I couldn't, now," she answered, very simply. "And we are wasting time in talk when every moment is precious. What did you pick up by wireless?"

"I had the *Princeton*, at Torreblanca."

"The *Princeton*! Then we *are* wasting time—we're getting farther and farther away from her every minute."

"No, that's impossible if she's actually at Torreblanca. We're drawing a little closer to her, if anything. The danger is that the wireless-operator will leave his instrument before I can call again. And I've got to have power from the engine-room."

"Then I'll watch your key while you go below," she promptly suggested.

He pondered the problem for a moment or two.

"No, that would only be exposing yourself and inviting danger," she amended. "You must give me the message. *I* must take it to the engine-room."

"I couldn't see you taking a risk like this," he protested, still puzzling over the problem.

"There's no risk, with me, because no one will *suspect*. And *you* must stay with your key."

He lifted his revolver from his bath-robe pocket, after another moment of thought.

"Then I want you to take this," he told her, holding it out for her. He noticed her puzzled glance up into his face, and then her quick and unequivocal movement of repudiation. They both knew, as they stood facing each other, that the ever-narrowing apex of the dilemma was crowding up to its final climacteric point.

"I could not use it," she said, shrinking away from the glimmering and intimidating little instrument of death. "I will not even need it."

"Then you must not be seen leaving this station."

"But what will you do—when the power comes?" she asked.

"*I'm going to send,*" was his reply. "I'll fight it out with him. Ganley can't dictate to the high seas of the world."

Even in anarchy and outlawry, he felt, there had to be some final substratum of reason. And Ganley had fallen back on nothing but brute force.

"Why couldn't I go to the captain?" she pleaded.

"That's worse than useless. He's drunk. And we'll only get *him* against us, for he'd order us to keep out of the mess. He'd fight shy of entangling alliances. He'd forbid me to send, for he's got his ship to clear from that port."

"But the *Princeton* would be *his* protection, as well as ours."

"That's true—but the man's brain is too brandy-soaked to understand such a situation. We've got to act ourselves, and on our own hook."

He told her, briefly, the way to the engine-room. Then he switched off his light, unlocked his door, and glanced out to see that the way was clear.

Yet he waited at that open door with his revolver in his hand, every moment of the time until she had crossed to the stair-head, until she had passed quietly down the brass-plated steps,

until he had made quite sure that she was below-stairs.

Then he locked himself in again, and made a mad and desperate dash into his clothes. Then he unlimbered his revolver, looked over its chambers, brought out his box of cartridges, and saw that every cartridge was in place. He had, by this time, more or less made up his mind as to his line of procedure.

He had his natural rights, and they were going to be respected. There would be no more free-and-easy invasion of his station, no more buccaneer's airy threats of force. He had been made a football of for too long: he had been mauled and bullied and browbeaten like a street-curb panhandler. He was an official, with official duties to perform. The full sense of his responsibility came home to him, as he took thought of the vast and ponderous machinery behind him, of the reserved and gigantic forces of which he was a mere out-runner. The time had come to act, and he was going to act. And at the first movement of aggression or interference from Ganley, he would shoot—and he had long since learned to pride himself on the fact that when he shot he seldom wasted powder.

As he waited for the engine-room's response to his dynamo he busied himself in barricading

the cabin-window with a shelf-board wrenched from his closet, and in drawing out his trunk and standing it on end, to be shoved against the locked door as a further re-enforcement against attack from outside. The wall-plates themselves, he knew, could never be penetrated by a bullet. It was the wooden-shuttered window and the door alone that needed defense.

No touch of fear rested on McKinnon as he worked out his plan, point by point; it was more perplexity as to the outcome of the movement, touched with wonder as to whether or not any contingency had been overlooked. He was glad of action, of something against which to direct his stored-up nervous energy. He regretted, vaguely, that Alicia had in any way been dragged into this trial by fire, that she had in any way been identified with a combat so sordid and demeaning. Yet he felt, in some way, that this final combat was to subject her to the acid-test of a final integrity. It would be unalloyed purity of purpose, he argued, that would keep her at his side during such an ordeal. He almost gloried in the thought that such an unequivocal and authentic seal was to be put on a relationship that had once seemed little more than fortuitous.

CHAPTER XXI

THE UNEXPECTED BLOW

McKINNON, ill at ease, tested his coils and wondered if Alicia had indeed succeeded in reaching the engine-room. Then he wondered if she were once more safely back in her cabin. Then all thought passed away from him, for the light patter of hurried footsteps, followed by an oath and an answering cry of alarm, sounded from outside his door.

“You keep out o’ here!”

It was Ganley’s voice, short and brisk. The knob of the locked door twisted and moved. The new-comer, whoever it was, must have caught hold of this knob from the outside. It was equally plain, from the sound of the sudden gasp and the scuffle that followed, that Ganley had flung this intercepted visitor aside from the door. It was then, and only then, that the listening operator realised who that new-comer must be.

McKinnon switched out his light before he

opened the door, for he wanted every chance.

The first message that flashed to his brain was that it was very dark outside. The second was that a great malletlike hand had descended unexpectedly on his own, out of this darkness, and had sent his revolver rattling across the boards of the cabin floor. His next was the knowledge of clinching and writhing and struggling with a desperately fighting and heaving hulk that for a moment bore him back over his door-sill.

Then came a brief and bitter battle for what seemed to be a short-barreled, heavy-butted revolver in one of the malletlike hands. The revolver fell away from them both in the hot and stifling blackness of the cabin, but still they clawed and panted and writhed from side to side.

“The lights!” cried the warning girl through the darkness.

Then came the sound of the door slammed shut, and the girl again crying to McKinnon to turn on the light. He dropped low and twisted sharply, tearing himself loose from the apelike arms.

“The light—turn on the light!” still cried the helpless girl, as though apprehensive of some danger he could not fathom.

McKinnon, still panting and shaking, sprang

for his light-switch and snapped on the current. The blank darkness puffed into a sudden picture.

It showed in sparkling high-lights on the wireless apparatus. It revealed the huddled figure of Ganley crouching back against the sleeping-berth. It showed the white-faced and terrified woman close by the cabin door. But that was all; for in the next second the light went out again, and the cabin was once more blanketed in utter darkness.

But McKinnon, in that brief heart-throb of illumination, had caught and fixed in his mind's eye the position of his fallen revolver.

He was already on his hands and knees, on the floor, like a cat, crawling to the farther corner of his dynamo base.

The silence seemed something material, something smothering and choking the three watchers. No one knew from what quarter the bolt would strike. McKinnon's fingers padded feverishly yet silently about the floor, exploring the area in which his fallen revolver must lie. He thought he had it; but his fingers had closed only on his heavy, canvas-covered dumbbell. He padded farther into the blackness, feeling along the dynamo base, wondering if it were blood or only sweat that was trickling down his face.

Then he gave a gasp of relief, and fell back, slowly drawing himself upright as he retreated. He had recovered the revolver. He was armed again; he was once more able to face the situation. All he wanted now was to get the woman out of the way, out of the cabin, if possible. It was not going to be the sort of thing she should face. It was too late for half-measures. He had been subjected to too much; he had gone through too much. There could be no possibilities of further compromise. He felt, dimly, that it would be horrible; and yet he felt that it had to be. It was the inevitable and final movement toward which all others had centred.

He backed toward the door until his groping hand came in contact with its knob. Then he caught at the girl's arm, and half-pushed, half-dragged her toward the threshold, with a whispered "*Quick!*"

He never knew whether she mistook him for Ganley, or whether she had determined to remain in the wireless room, even against his wishes. But she did not go; she only drew closer in to the wall as he swung the door open for her.

It was at that moment that Ganley must have caught some dim silhouette of his figure against the less opaque blackness of the open deck. For, as the door circled back on its hinges, Gan-

ley swung out with the oak-framed steamer-chair which he had already caught up as a weapon of defence.

He swung it short and quick, with a forward and elliptical motion, as he leaned out toward the dimly discerned shadow. He heard it strike home; he heard the inarticulate little half-groan, half-sigh, as the stunned man crumpled down over the door-sill.

Ganley also heard the woman's cry of terror, but he had other things to think of, other fish to fry. He pawed frenziedly about the cabin wall until he found the switch, and turned on the light. He saw McKinnon still sprawled half over his door-sill; he saw the woman crouched shield-like over his body; he saw the broken steamer-chair lying on the cabin floor. He also saw the heavy iron dumb-bell, covered with rusted canvas, lying at his feet, not six inches from the dynamo base. The terrified woman, waiting for the unknown end, screamed again, and still again, as she saw him stoop and catch it up.

It was not until the great, ape-like arm of the gun-runner brought the dumb-bell crashing down on the operating table that she realised her mistake, that his actual intention flashed through her.

His fury now was not being directed toward

McKinnon. It was the instrument that he was attacking. For the heavy iron had struck with a crashing blow on the delicately poised responder, with its fragile and mysterious coherer, crushing the flimsy mechanism of glass and wood and metal as a mallet might crush a bird's egg. She felt McKinnon's mumbling and struggling body under her; but she gave it no thought. She only saw and knew that this maddened brute was beating the very heart out of their wireless apparatus, that with every blow he was crushing her last hopes. She dragged and wrenched McKinnon's revolver from his outstretched hand. But before she could so much as raise it, Ganley's second blow had fallen. This time it fell on the "key" itself, tearing the heavy metal lever free from its binding-post. He had just caught it up and flung it malignantly through the open cabin door, whirling out into the sea, when she fired.

Her first shot went wild. Before she had time for a second, Ganley had wheeled about and sprung on her through the smoke-filled air. The huge forty-four Colt seemed too heavy for her, beyond her strength, for she had no second chance of using it, of poising and adjusting and aiming it, as she knew she should have.

But she caught at him and clung to him, blindly, panting and screaming, wondering why

no one came. She clung and clawed at him like a cat, until, under the sheer fury of that attack, he had to take thought to defend himself.

He fell back a step or two, and the movement sent them both falling over the broken steamer-chair, grotesquely, foolishly. But not for a moment did the woman cease to fight and scream. The sound of it all seemed to sting the dazed McKinnon into a consciousness of what was going on. He pawed about at the wall, foolishly, for support, like a child learning to walk; he dragged himself up to a sitting posture. But before he could struggle to his feet, Captain Yandel and an officer from the bridge were in the cabin. He saw them tearing and dragging at Ganley's great limbs. He saw the white and panting and disheveled group once more upright, each shaking and facing the other. Then for the first time he saw his dismantled apparatus.

“What's this shooting on my ship?” roared the captain.

“That cat tried to kill me!” cried Ganley, breathing short and quick. The woman struggled to speak, but the captain gave her no attention. His eye for the first time had fallen on McKinnon leaning against the cabin wall,

with a little trickle of blood running down over one swollen cheek-bone.

“What’s this mean?” he demanded of his operator. McKinnon’s senses had come back to him by this time. But a hopelessness that was almost worse than death itself crept through him.

“He’s killed our wireless! Our wireless! Can’t you see he’s killed it!”

The captain’s mental state was such that ideas filtered into the narrow seat of his consciousness but slowly.

“But how? And why?”

“The responder!” gasped McKinnon.

“But what of it?”

“Look at that responder!” cried the operator. “It’s smashed. And the key’s ruined! He’s cut the heart out of our apparatus!”

“But I want to know the meaning of this bar-room brawling aboard my ship!” still thundered its master.

McKinnon pointed landward savagely, toward the mangrove swamps and mountains of Locombia.

“He’s been trying to stop my sending. He said he’d kill me if I sent.”

“That’s a lie,” retorted Ganley. “He’s working with this woman to juggle messages

for Duran! They're making a tool of you and your ship!"'

"*That* shows who's making a tool of you!"' cried McKinnon, pointing with his lean and shaking finger to the shattered responder. The ship captain's face was blotched and purplish and horrible to look at by this time.

"And he's killed our wireless?"'

"Look at it," answered McKinnon.

For the second time Captain Yandel looked. The indignity, the enormity of the thing threw him into a slowly growing ecstasy of sublimated rage.

"And who fired that shot?"' he demanded, with an almost voluptuous delight in the anticipation of further fuel for a still more towering fire.

"I did," said the white-faced woman.

"So you did," purred the captain, slowly releasing the torrent. "And you're a nice pair, the two of you, makin' a pot-house of my ship! You half-breed filibusters! You garlic-eating outlaws! You murderin', slave-drivin' tinhorn conspirators!"'

"Stop!" cried McKinnon.

"Get out o' here, you flimflam beach-combers!"' roared on the unheeding officer.

"Get out o' my sight! Get down to your cabins and stay there until you're put ashore

at Puerto Locombia, or by the living God, if you so much as show a nose outside your doors, I'll clap the whole lot o' you into irons and carry you back to New York harbour!"

It meant nothing to the weak and bewildered girl, after what she had gone through, but it wounded some inner and ever guarded part of her to see that McKinnon made no effort to intervene, that he had not stepped in and spoken for her.

It was not until his steadyng glance met hers that she began to realise he was holding something in reserve, that he had his reasons, that he was plotting out some new line of procedure, and with this discovery came a renewed memory of the hopelessness of their position, of the dangers confronting them, of the last avenue of delivery that had been cut off from them. The blasphemy and truculence of a ship captain meant nothing to her; the satyr-like exultation of Ganley meant nothing. She knew that she had been fighting for life, or something almost as worthy as life. And she knew that the fight had by no means approached its end.

CHAPTER XXII

THE PRIMORDIAL HOUR

It was nothing but an eye-glance that passed between Alicia and McKinnon. Yet in that fraction of a second intimacies flashed between them, a message was delivered and received, the encouragement of one lonely soul offering its help to another was cryptically given and taken. It showed her, too, that judgment and intelligence were once more on their throne with her ally, that he was no longer beating and threshing his way about on the primordial sloughs of mere assault and defence. He was a thinking being once more, with his own secret ends and his own secret means to them. And she was sick of the primordial; every woman's fibre in her body was offended and felt degraded by that caveman's hand-to-hand fight through which she had passed.

The shaking-limbed captain had swung about on McKinnon.

“Have you picked up anything about fightin’

in there?" he demanded, with his guttural running obligato of mariner's oaths. "Or have you been too taken up with your own fightin'?"

"I've picked up nothing," was McKinnon's answer.

"Then why can't you get Guariqui?"

The ship's master was still slow in grasping the situation.

"I tell you we're cut off from everything! My responder's gone!"

"Can't you fix it?"

"No!"

"You can't?"

"Not unless there's a De Forest responder brought aboard from Puerto Locombia."

"Can't you shift without it?"

"No more than you can live without a heart."

The captain turned on the strangely placid-eyed and listening Ganley. The latter's indifference seemed to sting him into a renewed ecstasy of anger.

"You'll cool your heels in the Puerto Locombia *quartel* for this," he declared, with another of his explosive oaths. "I'll damned soon hand you over where you belong!"

His threat had no ponderable effect on his placid-eyed listener. The gun-runner's heavy face, with its houndlike, pendulous jaws, and the drooping-lidded, deep-set eyes, with their

misleading look of pathos, seemed to show nothing but a patient forbearance.

"I want you to get that couple where they belong," he calmly and slowly replied. "I want that woman put where she won't be taking pot-shots at every passenger she doesn't like!"

The waiting and wide-eyed group at the door had increased by this time, until their bodies, pressing close, shut all air from the crowded cabin. The captain shouldered them back savagely. That his authority should be overridden, in his own ship, on his own deck, was more than he could endure.

"Get out o' here!" he cried, in his arbitrary and inconsequential rage. "Get out o' this cabin, or I'll throw you out!"

The ship's mate, a wiry Costa Rican with the hungry and predaceous face of a pirate, made an effort to forestall his superior officer's intention. He dropped the leather-covered bridge-telescope which in his haste he had carried with him, and caught the rebellious passenger by the right arm, as though to drag him forth.

But one sweep of that huge right arm sent the mate stumbling and falling over the ruins of the steamer-chair.

Captain Yandel beheld that offence, and it left him no longer a reasoning being. His last instinctive sense of order and right had been

outraged. He caught up the leather-covered bridge-telescope. He swung it circlingly back, above his head, as a blacksmith swings a sledge. He would have brought that poised cylinder of glass and steel blindly down on the other man's skull, had the ship's mate not caught the end of the telescope and stopped the murderous blow.

"You coward!" said Ganley, without moving. The two ship's officers still stood there, automatically and blindly and grotesquely contending for the cylinder of leather-covered steel.

"Not that way," cried the mate. "Don't kill him!"

"Yes, I'll kill him!" raged the captain. "I'll kill him any way he wants!"

"Then fight it out on deck—fight it out like men!"

"Fight it out!" echoed a half-caste deck-hand, shrilly, carried away by his feelings, as the crowd surged out into the open spaces of the star-lit deck.

"Yes, fight it out, by God!" bellowed the infuriated and unreasoning ship's captain, peeling off his coat and waving back the circle of onlookers. "Fight it out, like men!"

Heilig, the chief-engineer, pushed through the protesting crowd.

"Captain," he said in his slow and gloomy

monotone, "what call've yuh got to go prize-fightin' on your own ship?"

"Shut up!" howled back his superior officer. "Get back!"

"Why're yuh fightin' with a he-rhinoceros like *him*?" persisted the other.

"Get back! Gi' me room!"

The gloomy misanthrope of the engine-room did not move. He stood regarding the circle with calm and scoffing eyes.

"It ain't fittin'," he slowly objected. "And it ain't right!"

"Right? I know my rights!" yelped back Captain Yandel, waving the interloper aside.

He rolled up his sleeves, with shaking hands, disclosing strangely fashioned tattooed figures on his thick and hirsute forearms.

McKinnon closed the door, that the woman in the cabin might not see. There was the sound of a boatswain's whistle, a murmur of voices, a quick shuffling of feet. A space was cleared on the deck, promptly, solemnly, as though for the despatch of some casual and duly appointed ship's business. Then the circle re-formed, watching and silent, waiting with set faces, for what was to come. And McKinnon saw that it was indeed to come, that there was no escaping it.

For one moment only did Ganley hesitate.

Just once did the deepset and malicious little eyes shift in one sidelong glance of hesitancy. McKinnon, from his cabin door, could see that look. He could see the change of colour that crept slowly up through the gun-runner's flaccid face. It did not blanch, but it merged from a brick-dust tint to the dead-brown hue of untanned leather. It became cadaverous, and horrible to look at. Even then he must have seen and known that it was all madness, that it was more than useless, that it solved no problems and settled no issues. But he had no choice left to him.

McKinnon's first thought, as he watched, was that Ganley would never fight fair. Then he beheld the close-packed circle of rough and waiting faces, of bare-armed and hard-eyed watchers—for even the stokers' hole had vomited forth its soot-streaked, naked-shouldered children of wonder—and he knew that the gun-runner could gain nothing by trickery. The ferine and active brain housed in the great sun-brown skull would be of no use to him in this. The adroit and vulpine intelligence beyond its screening frontal bone could now flash out no path of deliverance. He was confronted by passions that were adamitic in their primitiveness, by forces that belonged to the world of claws and tusks and talons.

Then the two men fought.

It seemed grotesque, at first, to the wearied and indifferently watching McKinnon. It made him think of a combat between two butchers, two gross butchers clad in white. There was something ludicrous in the two heavy and lurching and staggering bodies, lunging at each other, like Pleistocene beasts from the twilight of time, like primordial monsters in the bitter and brutal combat of bitter and brutal ages. The sweat oozed out on their skins. It diamonded their faces. Then the beads of moisture ran together, and gathered into slow runnels that smarted in their eyes and moistened their necks and dripped on their clothing, mottled more and more with splashes of red.

Then it became brutish. It became blind and ponderous, like a bull-fight. It impressed McKinnon as something wordlessly pathetic, it was so useless and unreasoning, so futile and foolish, in the face of all the vaster problems that confronted that lonely steamship and the lives she carried. It did not horrify him, for by this time he was beyond horror, as a swimmer is beyond thought of a passing rain-shower.

Then it became sickening. The impact of bone and flesh on flesh and bone seemed demeaning and dehumanising to the dazed and shrink-

ing onlooker. The hot night air, which left breathing a burden to even the untaxed lungs, made the gasping of the two combatants audible and vocal, made it pitiful, like the gasps of the drowning, made it short and guttural, like the tongue-choked chest heaves of an anæsthetised patient. The fighters became two vaguely heaving and gasping white hulks blotched with blood. There seemed something more than sinister in their dogged persistence. It became satanic. It grew into an affront to manhood, an insult to the quiet stars that looked down on it. It became a living nightmare, in which two coiled and striking and threshing Hates emerged from a slime that was antediluvian.

McKinnon turned away, sick and faint. For he had seen one of the red-blotched hulks fall back and lie full length on the deck. He had seen the *Laminian*'s captain lean over that prostrate figure, weakly, swaying forward and then backward, where he would surely have fallen, had one of his sailors not caught him under the armpits and held him up. It was over.

McKinnon heard the guttering yelp of triumph, the unreasoning and vapid snarl of success, of the ship's master who had re-established his disputed mastership.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE RECAPTURED KEY

McKINNON turned from the quiet and horror-stricken figure of Alicia, huddled back on his berth-end, and contemplated what was left of his broken and dismantled apparatus. He felt like a child in an open boat, without oars, approaching an inevitable Niagara.

Then he turned back to the girl. There was no message of consolation he could bring to her. It came slowly home to him how hopeless the entire future stretched before them. A great hatred for the ship on which he stood grew up in him. His spirit revolted against the horrors it had housed, against the ordeals through which it had thrust a tender and innocent life, against the enigmatic perils with which it was still to threaten that life and his own.

Then he grew calmer-thoughted. He began to grope and probe about for explanations that would sustain her. But the task was a fruitless one. There was nothing to say. Instinctively,

as he stooped over her, he touched her hand and murmured: "I'm sorry." He was a man of action always before one of emotion. But he had to swallow hard, to clear the lump from his throat as he spoke.

He stroked the passive hand that lay on his pillow, with the rough timidity with which a seaman might stroke a tired and captured land bird. Then he drew back his berth-curtain and lifted his electric fan from its shelf, placing it on the operating-table so that the current of air from its whirring wings might blow in to where she rested. Then he locked and bolted and doubly secured his cabin door.

"Is it hopeless?" she asked at last, without turning her face to him. She struggled to ask it casually, but the bitter listlessness of her voice translated every tone and word of that question into the notes of utter tragedy.

"No, it's not hopeless," he said, combatively, aggressively, for her sake alone. "This is a De Forest station. We have the international rights common to all wireless operation. We can stand on those rights. We can hold this room until help of some sort arrives."

It was foolish, he knew, even as he uttered it. They could be driven out, or starved out, or baked out, in a single day. Yet as he kept up the pleasant fiction, he was infinitely glad

of her presence there. He needed her, not because she could buoy him up to meet implacable adversities, but to compel him to sustain himself for her sake.

“We can attach a power-wire to that cabin door-handle, so that no one dare touch it. We can run a wire to——”

His voice trailed off and went out, like a burnt fuse. The change that had come over him was so sudden that the woman turned and sat up.

“Wait!” he called, in a voice so high-pitched it sounded what was almost a treble note. “Wait!”

He stood rooted to the spot for a moment, petrified by the new thought that had come to him.

“It’s *not* hopeless!” he cried exultantly.

“What is it?” asked the other, confronting him.

“It *can* be done! The models! My telephony models! They carry what is practically a responder!”

The woman watched him, wide-eyed, for he was down on the floor, on his knees, before the box of models, lifting out strange and delicate bits of machinery—machinery for which she had always felt a certain fear and aloofness, since the quiet evening he had spoken to her

of high-frequency oscillations and audions and ionising gases.

"I tell you I can make it work!" he exulted.

"Work?" she echoed.

"It'll take time, it'll take scheming, but I can do it! I can have the whole thing rigged up by daylight. By morning I can be sending and receiving again!"

He was on his feet by this time, trying to explain it to her.

"My key's gone, you see; but that doesn't make it hopeless. I can adjust a piece of heavy copper wire to my rear binding-post here. Then I can take the other end of that wire and touch it at the contact-point here where my key used to strike. I can spell out the Morse that way, word by word. We'll be able to talk! We'll be able to send out our message!"

"Is this true?" she asked, her wide and shadowy eyes searching his face.

"Yes, it's true!"

"Quite true?"

"Every word of it, or I don't know wireless!"

"That means we can call the *Princeton*."

"We'll be still closer by morning. I'll be ready and waiting by the time their operator is at his key. And by noon we ought to pick up Guariqui, if we passed the Toajiras Light over

three hours ago—no, before that, any time after sunrise!"

"If they are still sending!" said the woman.

"They *must* be sending," cried McKinnon, as he bent over his mysterious instruments. "They *must* be, or the *Princeton* would never have been calling them the way she was."

"Then I must help you in some way!"

"No, you must rest. This is work I have to do alone. You are worn out; you must have rest. You must sleep if you can."

"And you?" she asked.

"Oh, I'll be working this out. There'll be no sleeping in this place, you know, once I start to send!"

"But I meant that *you* need rest," she explained.

He could even laugh now, although his laughter was both brief and preoccupied.

"Rest!" he cried. "I'm good for two days without a drop of it, once I've got things going the way I'm trying to make them go."

She watched the white electric light of the drop-globe pour down on his bent and constantly shifting head. She could see the little black stain of dried blood on his temple. She could also see the sweat running down the side of his face, between his cheek-bone and his ear. For some inexplicable reason, she gave a

throaty and inarticulate little gasp of gratitude.

“What is it?” he asked, looking up quickly.

“Nothing!” she answered, turning away her head so that he would not see a foolish tear or two in her eyes.

“I said things would go our way—and they *will!*” he declared, ruminatively. “Once we get this message out, we’ll have three hundred American bluejackets up in Guariqui inside of two days!”

“And Ganley?” she asked.

“Oh, Ganley will be about again, and very much alive by that time!”

“But what will he do—what *could* he do, if we reach Puerto Locombia before the *Princeton*? ”

He sat back, deep in troubled thought.

“That is the one thing I don’t know, I can’t tell. He’s hinted at some trump card he’s got up his sleeve—but he’s given no inkling of what it is.”

“Then we can only wait?”

“Yes, we can only wait!”

Then the tightened jaw-tendons relaxed into his quick and conciliating smile. “But why should we waste thought on things like that!” he cried, with his forced yet valiant laugh. “We’re going to have a banana-train filled with machine guns climbing up through those hills

and every rebel in Locombia under cover inside of three days!"

Alicia Boynton did not answer him as he stooped and studied and worked. But she sat there, with her hands clasped loosely together, gratefully and softly watching the aureole of light that the swinging electric made about the wireless-operator's head.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE CALL FOR HELP

THINGS did not go McKinnon's way as easily as he had expected, or had so bravely pretended to expect. The first gray tinge of morning, deepening slowly to pearl, showed along the eastern sky-line before he had completed his task.

He sat back with a sigh of relief; he sat back like a god who had wearied of creation, looking on his work and seeing that it was good. The gray and pearl along the sky-line had by this time turned to pale rose, and slender pencils of light were showing through the chinks in his cabin shutter.

Alicia Boynton was still asleep on his narrow berth. So narrow was her resting-place, and so quiet her breathing, that it seemed to him as though she were lying in a coffin. She had dropped off into that sleep of utter weariness against her will. She had resolved to be with him and near him every moment of his

labour, but the intriguing claims of the body had dethroned her volition.

And now, as he gazed down at her flower-like and tranquil face, he dreaded to waken her. He felt touched, as he watched the quiet throb of the pulse in her blue-veined temple where the dark and heavily massed brown hair had fallen back, with a sense of mystery before the ancient miracle of sleep. He wondered where her escaped spirit had gone to; it seemed nothing more than the quiescent shell of her, the empty husk of her, that he stood and watched.

A wayward sense of loneliness, of desertion, crept over him, and he turned about, not ungratefully, to listen to the familiar swish of deck-hose and thump of holy-stone as the early awakened deck-crew washed down the decks. It was commonplace enough, that swish of sea-water and thump of mumbling workers. But at the moment there was something wordlessly companionable in it to the listening McKinnon. It reminded him that the every-day trivialities, the orderly actualities that sustain the machinery of life, must always go on, no matter how close may brood the spirit of outer tragedy. It reminded him, too, that it was morning, and that the hour of his ultimate trial had arrived.

He swung his door open, and looked out along the deck. He beheld a windless sea, and a

blood-red tropical sun mounting up above its rim, where dull orange paled into dark azure. On his face he could feel the sea air, still fresh and balmy. There seemed something Edenic in its limpidity, something unearthly in its over-exquisite and unvoluptuous softness. It seemed to etherealise life, to beautify even the tainted and sordid hulk of wood and steel and steam that forged ever forward across its universal curve of azure peace. The sea itself, as he stood there watching it, assumed strange and quickly altering tints. Along some slight wind-riffle it became claret-coloured and turquoise and violet. The lace-work edge of some wandering current left it royal with floating purple, shot through, in spots, with flashing ruby-red that held all the fire of a thousand cinnamon-garnets. In other places some miracle of refracted light made the softly undulatory surface a bosom of breathing quicksilver. Then a point's shift in the sun's altitude merged and darkened the silver into the pale blue of forget-me-nots, deepening it still again into dully lustrous maroon and lapis-lazuli, streaking it with lilac and apple-green, leaving it as varied and mystic as the breast-plate of an Hebraic high-priest.

McKinnon took a deep breath of that soft and balmy air, and felt that life was still beautiful. He felt that there were still great hopes to be

thankful for, great hazards to be gladly faced, great ends to be attained.

Then his thoughts came down to more material things, as he looked about and beheld a dirty-jacketed and heavy-eyed steward carrying a pewter coffee-pot and a tray of fruit and toast and eggs along the deck to the captain's stateroom, but who veered about to the wireless-room door, at a sign from McKinnon.

"Couldn't you leave that with me?" asked the operator.

"It's the captain's," said the steward, moving impassively on.

"Wait!" said McKinnon, taking a bill from his pocket. "Your captain's not even awake yet. And you could have a second trayful up to him in ten minutes."

The heavy-eyed steward willingly enough surrendered his burden when McKinnon thrust the bank-note into his hand, and went shuffling below-stairs again, to replace the coffee-pot and replenish the tray.

McKinnon closed and locked his cabin door, before he set down the breakfast thus caught on the wing. When he looked up he saw Alicia Boynton regarding him with wide-open and vaguely wondering eyes. He felt glad that he had escaped the brutality of waking her to the troubled world that still encompassed them.

"What is it?" she asked.

"It's your breakfast," he said, with studied cheeriness. "You're going to eat it while I start to send."

"Then you *can* send?" she asked. Her world of reality seemed slow in coming back to her.

"I've got to go to the engine-room first," he explained, "to see about my power."

"What must I do?" she asked.

"Lock this door when I go out, and don't open it; don't open it for Captain Yandel himself, until you hear me knock three times."

She had made her hurried toilet by the time he was back, but the coffee and eggs remained untouched. McKinnon, at the still open door, could see that the brief tropical morning had already merged into open day. He could see, too, that they had drawn closer in to the Locombian coast. Along the southwest lay a broken blue line of mountains, remote and lonely-looking. They seemed to him, under their high-arching sky of abysmal blue, like some forlorn and ragged rampart of a world's end. Still nearer stretched the alluvial plains and the low, flat line of swamp-land, broken here and there by clumps of palms, along the higher spots where the ground-swell of the emerald-tinted shallows broke in blinding white on the coral beaches.

Between the toppling peaks of the Cordilleras and the littoral mangrove swamps hung a crawling and miasmal fog, curling and feeling its way inward, like a snake trying to escape the heel of the hot sun. McKinnon's flesh tingled and crept a little as he looked on it, for it disquieted and overawed him, that land of crawling mists and blazing light and flaming heat. The thought of its overcrowded and self-strangling vegetation, of its ceaseless and sinister and over-exuberant life, depressed him. He was glad enough to shut and lock his door on it all.

"You haven't eaten?" he said, as his eye fell on the untouched breakfast.

"I don't think I could," she protested.

"But you must!" he declared; and she found, to her wonder, that his note of authority held something vaguely appealing and consoling to her.

"I couldn't until I knew you were sending again!"

He thought over that statement, for the situation had its difficulties.

"Not a word, not a dot, goes out until we've had our breakfast," was his ultimatum. He knew that she needed nourishment. He also knew that it would be unwise to bank too strongly on his untested apparatus. And he knew that defeat, if defeat it was, would be a

crushing one. So he ate, though it was more to encourage her than to appease his own hunger. And when their frugal meal was finished, he looked at his watch with speculative and half-closed eyes. Then he gave a deep sigh and turned to his operating-table.

“Time’s up!” was all he said.

The girl, sitting on the berth-edge, saw his hand go up to the switch-board; she saw the lever come down on the contact-pins, one by one, and heard the hum and drone of the wakened dynamo. She saw his rubber-muffled fingers catch up the piece of heavy insulated copper wire which had been attached to the dismantled binding-post, and the flash of blue flame that exploded from knob to knob across the spark-gap as he completed his circuit by touching his wire-end to the contact-point of his improvised key. She saw his intently inclined head as he sat listening with his phones pressed close over his ears, and the strong-sinewed yet still oddly boyish-looking face beaded with minute drops of perspiration.

His preoccupied left hand went out to his tuner, and still he sat there, over his reconstructed responder, waiting. The only sound in the cabin was the continuous whir of the electric fan on its unpainted pine shelf. The minutes dragged slowly away. The silence be-

came nerve-torturing, piling up like a wave that refuses to break and fall.

“It’s useless!” cried the girl.

McKinnon silenced her with a peremptory movement of the hand.

“Wait!” he commanded.

He leaned forward, slowly, until his breastbone pressed against the edge of the table. Then came a moment or two of unbroken quietness.

“*I’ve got them!*” he whispered.

But still again the silence was unbroken as the man with the glimmering steel band across his head sat crooked up like a schoolboy over a slate, listening. His hand went out to the lever-heads in the numeral-lined slots of his tuning-box, as he paused to tune up to the wave-pitch of some as yet undecipherable message. His half-closed eyes opened and widened, and he was suddenly springing for the switch-handle of his starting-box again.

“*I’ve got them!*” he cried exultantly, as he turned to his key. “*I’ve got two of them!*”

“Two of them?”

“Yes; they’re both talking at once. I’ve got to make one hold back, if I can reach him. If not, I’ve got to tune him out!”

His voice was cut off by the familiar spit and flash of the huge blue spark, and a thin ozonic

odour filled the closed room, strangely like the smell of summer air after a thunder-storm. The rapt and wistful eyes of the woman watched him as he worked, touched into wonder before the inscrutable, humbled into momentary amazement by the unfathomable mystery of Hertzian waves.

“Thank God!” he cried, “it’s Guariqui!”

“Guariqui!” echoed the woman.

He silenced her sharply, for he had his ear at his phone again, and was once more working nervously over his tuning-box.

“We’ve lost them,” he murmured dejectedly.

“Are you sure?” she whispered, out of the silence that followed.

“We’ve lost them both!” he almost groaned. The whir of the fan and the breathing of the two listeners was the only sound in the cabin. The quietness again seemed like an up-piling breaker that refused to fall and retreat. The woman stirred uneasily.

“Wait!” cried McKinnon, with suddenly inclined head. His face, now seamed with runnels of sweat, was drawn and the jaw muscles were set and knotted. He jerked a nervous hand toward the droning fan, peevishly, as though its presence were a personal affront to him.

“Shut off that fan,” he commanded.

The woman rose without a word and shut it

off. There was a malicious little spit of the rebellious current, a spark of blue under the japanned standard, and the revolving brass wheel-wings came to a stop. Nothing but the sound of breathing filled the cabin.

“There!” McKinnon’s voice erupted like one of his own coil-sparks through the silence. “Now I’ve got them!”

He jumped for his key, talking over his shoulder as he did so.

“It’s the Guariqui operator,” he explained, as he worked. “He’s sending very weak; I can hardly get him. He says his power’s giving out, and De Brigard’s men are targeting at his aerials with carbines.

Then he flung himself into his chair, and caught up his form pad for transcription, with his receiver once more over his head. He wrote slowly, with intent eyes and wrinkled brow, word after word, sometimes going back and scratching out a phrase, sometimes puzzled by a lost dot or dash in the stuttering Morse, sometimes quickly “breaking” and asking the operator to repeat. His breath came shorter and quicker as he listened and wrote. Then he called frenziedly, and listened, and called again.

“They’re dead!” he exclaimed, in disgust.

“Dead?” cried the woman, in white-lipped alarm.

"I mean I can't get them! Their wires must be gone!"

His use of the word "dead" still terrified the woman at his side. He had no time to explain. He simply thrust his inscribed pad sheets into her hand as he turned to his key again, for time now was precious, terribly precious.

She read:

Duran's men all here. Shut up in city waiting cartridge shipment. Light skirmishes last two days. Ulloa held De Brigard back all yesterday, but had to fall back on city at night. Short of ammunition. . . . We are shut in. De Brigard's forces surrounded city at daybreak. Courier reports rebels bringing machine guns up through hills, from Sanibella. We must have help before guns join bombardment. Carbines are picking at my aerials from Paraiso Hill, to the east. Can you get Chilean battleship two days off Puerto Locombia or British ship out of Kingston? Must have help. Relay call to anything in reach. . . . Duran's authority. . . . Or if Chilean or British marines can be landed in time advise them to push in by way of Boracao. American Consul Klauser shut up there holding wireless with Kilvert, United Fruit operator, but report bad sending. . . . Is only disaffected town outside capital. . . . Entrain there. . . . Must hurry. . . .

Her hungry eyes rushed back and forth along the second sheet which McKinnon had thrust into her hand:

Can get *Princeton*. . . . Some one from God's country. . . . Must hurry. Yes, president and cabinet safe. Seven hundred crowded in Palace yards and water shut off. Tell *Princeton* not to wait to land guns. Remember Boracao switch bridge is mined. . . . Bullet against switch-

board. . . . Get me south of Boston again—hurry—use—power dying—hurry.

That was the end of the message.

“But the *Princeton!*” gasped the woman. “If you can’t get the *Princeton!*”

“Wait—wait—I’m getting her,” answered the man, bent low over his responder, as though the sense it appealed to were vision and not sight. “They’ve been waiting for me to relay. They’ve been——”

He left the speech unended, for he was busy sending his spark cannonading across its gap.

He kept up that cannonading until it seemed to the watching woman that it was never going to end. Then he switched off and listened again, and again cannonaded his answer.

Then he dropped wearily into his chair, wiped he was not alone. He looked up at the woman with a strangely transfiguring smile on his sweat-stained face.

“It’s over,” he said, with the simplicity of utter weariness.

“You’ve got them—the *Princeton?*” she asked.

“I’ve got them!”

She put out her two hands to him. It was meant as an impersonal gesture of gratitude, and he knew it as he took them in his. But there seemed something revivifying and electrical in

the sweat from his face, and remembered that mere contact with them, something that brought the hope and joy of life back to his tired body. He laughed aloud.

“I gave them what they were aching for! They were lying there steaming and baking and fretting for the very one word I sent on to them.”

“Then they’ll come?”

“Come! Yes, they’ll come! They’ve been lying there *whimpering* to get up at De Brigard, just like a rat-terrier whimpering to get at a kitten.”

He was silent for a moment, as his mind pictured the sudden change, so many miles away, that was flashing and thrilling through all the great gray hulk of that wakened battle-ship, of the signal-bells clang, the orders being given, the furnaces being stoked, the decks being cleared.

“And before to-morrow night they will be anchored at Puerto Locombia.”

“Before to-morrow night?” she repeated, with sinking heart.

“She has to steam all the way from Torreblanca—she can’t cover the distance in less than thirty hours under any circumstances.”

“But *we* will be at Puerto Locombia to-day, before nightfall!”

“I know it,” he said, with all the joy and confidence trailing out of his voice.

“Then Ganley will have one whole day to act. The Sanibella guns will be pushed up to Guariqui. Ulloa’s men will be without ammunition.”

“They can hold out!” he answered her.

“But they may not,” she cried. “It may all be over and done before we can help them. And we will be here at the mercy of Ganley!”

She failed to impart any shred of her terror to the listening operator.

“Yes,” he said, with abstracted and studious eyes, “that is the one thing that worries me.”

“But Ganley can do *anything*, once we’re at Puerto Locombia. This ship and everything it carries will be under his thumb!”

“Yes, that is still our problem—we’ve still got that bridge to cross,” he confessed. “Yet I think we can cross it, when the time comes.”

“But how?” she demanded.

“By not having this ship remain at Puerto Locombia, once Ganley’s put ashore,” was his answer.

“Then in what way could we still help Guariqui—in time?” was her forlorn and helpless query.

“We’ve got to *make* a way!” he told her, with his grim yet reassuring smile.

CHAPTER XXV

THE TRUMP CARD

IT was eight hours later that the *Laminian* made her way under half-speed into the roadstead at Puerto Loombia.

She drifted guardedly in over shoals of translucent verdancy, with her screw churning the lettuce-green waters into coiling and copperas-tinted eddies.

A long iron pier ran out into this green-watered roadstead, its trestles spanned by the single track of a narrow-gauge railway. On either side of the concrete breakwater that lipped the sea-edge of the town itself stretched away two curves of white sand with their intermittently whitening surf. Then came scattering clumps of lonely palms, then a lower mist-hung coast of ooze and mangrove and steaming lagoon.

Behind the concreted crescent of shore-line, to which the roadstead pier seemed like an arrow set in a drawn bow, stood irregular lines

of thatched huts, of mud and bamboo wattle, crowding on narrow streets that sloped to the centre and held sidewalks no wider than a wall-top. Still nearer ranged the more substantial part of the town, the bald, sun-scorched buildings of corrugated iron and tin, the one-story, open-front shops, with red tile roofs, the uninviting rectangular *bodegas* and the austere and gloomy government buildings. Over the latter drooped strange flags of yellow and red and blue.

On the higher ground to the right ran rusty streets lined with pink and yellow-tinted house walls of stucco, with heavy Spanish shutters and terra-cotta roof-tiles. Along the fringe of lower ground to the extreme left stood irregular rows of wattled huts, raised the height of a man from the "sand-jiggers" and the miasmal tundra under them, looking like lines of patient herons as they balanced on their rotting palm-wood stilts.

Beyond the town, leading into the slowly rising ground of the southwest, wound a road of shell and limestone, leaving a crooked scar of white against the blackness of the lowlands through which it crept. Close in by the concrete breakwater lay the ribs and spars of a wrecked schooner, mysteriously adding to the atmosphere of gloom and neglect. On a side-track

curving from the pier-end stood a dismantled train of cars, so small that they looked like a child's toys. Near-by lay a derailed locomotive, brown with rust, strangely pathetic in its attitude of resigned helplessness. Thirty paces from this stood the tottering remains of a corrugated-iron warehouse, its fallen roof and twisted wall-plates showing plainly enough that it had been blown up by either Ulloa or the insurgents.

Farther out along the broken pier rolled and creaked a soft-coal-burning tug. About her single deck, under her overlarge and drooping ensign of red and yellow and blue, lounged and waited a number of figures in red-striped uniforms. Obsolete brass cannon shimmered at her bow and stern, and a carbine-rack showed out just aft of her wheel-house.

It was while this strangely accoutréed tug cast off and came puffing and wheeling about to meet the newcomer into the roadstead that McKinnon and Alicia Boynton stood at the rail, gazing landward. Nothing seemed left for them now but to watch and wait. Everything that lay in their power had been done; all they could do now was to study the cards as Fate threw them on the board.

“That’s one of De Brigard’s gunboats!” said the watching and anxious-eyed girl.

“So those are the tools that Ganley works

with!" said the operator, looking with open scorn at the strange tug, the strange ensign, the still stranger figures in uniform. He tried to hide his anxiety and depression under a lightness of tone that seemed as incongruous, even to his own ears, as the tricoloured ensign flapping over the soft-coal-burning craft before them.

"Those are the tools that can cut deep, when they have to," was the woman's answer, as she once more looked landward.

"They're burning Parroto!" cried some one from a lower deck, in plaintive wonder. "That's Parroto going up in smoke there!"

McKinnon, under the rocking awning that could not altogether shut out the hot sun of the late afternoon, leaned farther over the rail and peered inland.

Far to the south and west stretched the flat and gloomy swamps, steaming under the sun's rays, mephitic and menacing. Still farther away, tier by tier, rose the hills, with a condor wheeling above them here and there.

They lifted, in gentle waves softened with the green of orange and banana and cocoanut-palm, of bamboo and breadfruit, until they crowded mistily up to the huddled blue line of the mountain-ridges, to the very peaks of the Cordilleras, lonely, forbidding, and seemingly impenetrable.

From one of the nearer tiers of hills black columns of smoke twined and curled and billowed up into the air. It was the town of Parroto, still in flames.

But no sound or sign of movement came from shore. A mysterious and drug-like sleep seemed to envelop both town and swamp and hills. Yet McKinnon, watching with set and thoughtful face, knew that somewhere in the dust-laden streets between the stucco walls *señoritas* were peering from jalousies, and naked children were playing and lean curs were prowling. In the yellow church facing the Prado priests were moving about. In the shadowy *bodegas* flies were buzzing and glasses were clinking, and swarthy and undersized patriots were rolling cigarettes and enlarging on the true paths that led to liberty. In each tesselated *patio* shadowed by rustling palm-fronds, were women and old men, and beside the mud oven of each wattled hut meals were being made ready and eaten. It took him back to the past, painfully, to the past that he would much rather have forgotten.

“Does it look like home?” he asked the girl at his side, a little absently, a little bitterly.

She was silent for another minute or two, as her eyes turned through the broken line of the Cordilleras to where Guariqui lay, to where still

waited the life for which she had fought and risked so much.

“It will never seem home to me again,” she answered.

“But it was your home once!”

“Yes, I used to think it was almost beautiful. The movement and colour and mystery of it! The *fiestas*, and the music, the glitter and pomp of its little court life that so satisfied my foolish vanity, the riding and the freedom, the passion and warmth of everything! You may not believe me, or understand me when I say it, but I can remember when it used to make me almost drunk, especially at night!”

He felt vaguely envious of those earlier and happier days; he felt that he had been cheated out of something. But her eyes, through all their mournfulness, glowed like a tropical sea touched with moonlight, as she smiled up at him; and he forgot the feeling.

“It *was* beautiful to me—then,” she confessed. “But the beauty was there, I think, because I put it there.”

To the eyes of the tired and anxious man at her side it seemed anything but beautiful. It seemed a land of unbroken silence, of sullen mystery, of primordial shadow and gloom, from the white lip of the beach that sucked so feverishly at the pale copper-green of the sea-water

to the misty line of its farthest mountain-tops. And he wondered if it was to be allowed him ever to reach those mountains, and what would await him there. He wondered, with such odds against him, if the hour for activity would bring with it an honest fighting-chance.

He turned his anxious eyes to the tug swinging authoritatively in under the *Laminian*'s quarter. He knew only too well, from the gasconading attitudes of its uniformed officials, from the sheer effrontery with which they swung in and overhauled the bigger steamship, that he was at last beholding the local instruments of the new "Liberal" dictatorship. And he knew that with their advent the curtain was about to rise on a new act of the tangled drama. He racked his brain to understand what Ganley's move would be. He knew that all day long the gun-runner had kept to his cabin. A steward had reported that his head was bad and causing him much pain. He had eaten nothing; he had kept his berth, cursing the *Laminian* and the heat of her coffinlike cabins and, above all, her sottish and pigheaded captain.

Yet McKinnon knew it would take more than a sore head to keep Ganley from acting when the moment for action arrived. The one thing that puzzled the operator was what form that first move of Ganley's was to take.

Some hint as to the solution of that problem came even as he stood there at the ship's rail, watching. It came in the form of a shoe, flung from an open port-hole of the *Laminian* to the deck of the indrawing tug. This shoe—it was a ludicrous, wide-toed, well-worn thing of humble calfskin—was picked up by the epauled officer of the local *comandante*, looked at with open disgust, and flung openly overboard. But McKinnon noticed that before this took place, the officer in question had extracted from its wide-toed interior a slip of closely folded paper. He promptly disappeared from sight, in the wheel-house, and when he reappeared, his tug was grating and bumping along the *Laminian's* side-plates, heedless of the blasphemous and stentorian imprecations of Captain Yandel, bellowing and gesticulating from his bridge-end.

McKinnon himself neither heard nor noticed any of this. He was too busily engaged in watching the port-hole, from which the shoe had appeared. He saw a boat-hook swung carelessly up to it, a red hand reach out and lift something from the end of it, and the boat-hook continue to scratch along the ship's side-plates as though searching for a hold. Then the tug made fast.

Two minutes later a coffee-coloured official wearing cavalry boots, red-striped, blue denim

trousers, a yellow-faced white jacket and a gold-braided cap, came aboard. He carried a sword, held at his side by a red sash, and was followed by an alert-eyed, narrow-shouldered, yellow-faced youth in blue denim striped with red.

The officer with the sword brought his heels together and saluted Captain Yandel. That worthy seaman, descending from his bridge, demanded to know, in English, why he was so damned slow about getting pratique, and what all the damned fuss was about.

Before any reply was proffered to these impatient queries, Ganley himself appeared from below deck. A crooked smile rested on his bruised and swollen face, a smile that seemed more sinister than the light in his baleful and blood-shot little eyes.

“Come in off the deck!” he commanded, with the calmness of unquestioned authority.

That was all that McKinnon heard, for the talk was resumed in the captain’s stateroom, with thunderous volleys of broken Spanish on the one side, with calm and dictatorial insolence on the other. It was to this talk that Alicia, as she leaned over the ship’s rail, listened so attentively.

“What is it?” asked McKinnon, noticing her wide and terrified eyes.

“We are in quarantine,” she answered.

“In quarantine?”

“Yes.”

“Do they say why?”

“The *comandante* has ordered us to be held here. They are sending a detachment of soldiers to watch the ship. We are to be kept here, prisoners.”

“But there’s no fever!”

“No; of course not! It’s the old trick! They daren’t outrage our flag openly—we are an American ship! They daren’t insult our colours by open capture. But they draw what they call a dead line, and they shoot down everyone who crosses it!”

“So that’s how they intend to hold us!”

“Yes—I heard Ganley say, in Spanish, that he’d keep up here until he finished his game. He told Captain Yandel that he was going to tie him up here until his anchor-flukes were barnacled.”

“But what’s their excuse for this?” he asked, with absent and preoccupied eyes, for his busy brain was already reconnoitring into the menacing future.

“He claims that it’s yellow fever—that we’ve entered the affected zone.”

“So that was his trump card, after all!” said the meditative McKinnon.

“It’s the card that makes us lose,” was the

girl's hopeless rejoinder. "We must stay here prisoners, as much prisoners as though we were cooped up in a *quartel*, for a whole day and a whole night! We are here, worse than helpless, until the *Princeton* comes!"

She came to a stop, and shuddered a little.

"Oh, believe me," she told him, in her tense and low-toned voice, "believe me, I am not a coward! But anything, *anything*, can happen on this ship to-night!"

The intentness with which he was studying her face brought her wondering eyes up to his.

"I'm afraid you've got to be very brave," he said, as gently as he could.

"Yes I know," she said, a little brokenly.

"But braver in a different way," he amended.

"Why?" she asked.

"Because you and I are going to break this quarantine to-night!"

She looked from him to the smoke-columns that hung over Parroto, and then back at the carbine-rack and the brass guns of the *comandante's* smoke-belching ship-of-war.

"We can't," she said, with a little gasp of despair. "We would have no chance. There is no place to go to—and they will have orders to shoot. It would be giving them the chance they are waiting for. We can't go!"

“We’ve got to!” McKinnon said, doggedly.

“But where could we go? Where could we find safety?” she demanded, as her hopeless and unhappy eyes swept the inhospitable country that confronted them. In all that country, she knew, there was not a hamlet or town, not a valley or jungle, that could offer them safety. There was not a square mile of it, outside the beleaguered walls of Guariqui itself, that would offer them harbour.

“*We’re going to Guariqui to-night—you and I!*” said McKinnon, meeting her wondering gaze with his clear and steadfast eyes.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE DEAD-LINE

ALICIA stood on guard at the door of the wireless room, waiting for McKinnon's return. More and more, in those last strange hours of uncertainty, she dreaded being alone. There seemed something ominous and bodeful in the very quietness of the midnight ship, as she rocked and grated against the pier in the long and sul- len ground-swell of the roadstead. The screw no longer throbbed, the engines no longer pulsed and churned. The quietness seemed deathlike. It was broken only by the steps of De Brigard's sentries, as they sleepily paced the long deck, one to port and one to starboard. Yet even these two figures, with their shouldered carbines, seemed ghostlike, presaging vague evils. The heat, too, was oppressive, for not a breath of air seemed to stir in the quiet ship. But incomparably more oppressive was the silence so rhythmically broken by the spectral tread of the pacing sentries. Then the infinitely minute

sound of another movement crept in to her straining ears. She took up the heavy revolver as McKinnon had warned her to do, and crouched back into the remotest corner of the cabin, listening and waiting.

The girl's heart stood still as McKinnon himself quietly swung back the cabin door, dodged inside, and as quickly closed and locked the door behind him. He stood there with his back to her, listening, without so much as a glance in her direction. He heard the pacing steps pass and die away, and pass still again. Then he murmured a grateful "Thank Heaven!" took a deep breath, and turned slowly about to the waiting girl. His gaze was impersonal and abstracted; he scarcely seemed conscious of her presence as he stood there, deep in troubled thought.

"Well?" she whispered at last, struggling to keep some tremour of dread from her voice.

"I was right," he said, with the look of perplexity still in his studious eyes. "Eighty-eight boxes of fluxing-slag have been passed out from the hold and piled along the pier. They've been standing there covered with a tarpaulin."

"Is any one there?" she asked.

"Five of De Brigard's men—four men and an officer. The four men are moving those boxes now. They are lifting them in through the east door of the weigh-scales shed. The south door

has been kept shut; and the United Fruit Concern's track-motor has been kept there waiting. They have divided the eighty-eight boxes into two lots. They intend to take out only one-half of the shipment to-night. I counted the boxes from under the life-boat. Forty-three were left; that means they are taking off forty-five."

"That means almost three hundred thousand rounds of ammunition!" she exclaimed, with a little hopeless gesture of the hands.

"The Remington rifles, of course, they can't touch. The forty-five boxes, I imagine, have completely loaded the body of their car, filled it up!"

"But what are *we* to do?"

He looked at her, and laughed a little, recklessly.

"They have to run those boxes of slag out through Puerto Locombia to De Brigard's headquarters to-night. They have to get them out there quietly, very quietly. The track, doubtless, has been cleared for them. It *has* to be cleared for them, for even an eighty-horse-power motor can't side-track an ore-train or switch a string of banana-cars. And there is no longer any telegraph between this port and the inland points they have to pass."

"No, there is no telegraph," she said, still at sea.

"There are four men and an officer," he mused irrelevantly. Then he looked down at his watch, and turned abruptly to the girl again.

"You have a revolver?" he asked. She showed him the weapon. He looked it over, saw that it was fully loaded, and handed it back to her.

"Have you ever learned to use it?" he asked. She looked at him with growing wonder.

"I don't think I could kill a man," she said, very quietly and very slowly.

"But could you protect yourself, at a pinch? Could you shoot round a little with it, I mean?"

"I have learned to shoot," she said, white-lipped.

"Good; then that makes three!" he exclaimed. Her wide eyes, following him as he crossed to his trunk and opened it, detected the fact that, for all his assumption of jocularity, his hand was shaking a little as he held Ganley's huge revolver and his own under the electric light. He first saw that these two revolvers were fully loaded. Then he overturned a green cardboard box and counted his cartridges. There were one hundred and eighty-three, all told.

"What must I do?" she asked, as bravely as she could, taking the handful of cartridges he had doled out for her.

He stood once more studying her with his impersonal and abstracted eyes.

“Could you run a motor, a track-motor like this?” he asked, with a side-jerk of his head toward the pier.

“I have run one, often,” was her quiet answer. “There is no steering-wheel. It is simply a starting and speed-lever and the brakes —though we always took a boy, to blow, to keep the tracks clear!”

“The boy will not be needed, to-night,” was his grim rejoinder, as he once more studied his watch. She drew back from him, slowly, step by step, aghast.

“You are not going to try to take that motor from them?” she asked.

“We’ve *got* to take that motor. It’s our only way out. And with your help I can do it.”

“But these sentries! And there are five men! And forty-eight miles of country held by De Brigard!”

“Listen,” he said, so simply, so matter-of-fact in the facing of the problem, that his very quietness brought her stampeding thoughts back to her. “There are just two danger-zones. The first is in the weigh-scales shed, where those five men will be. The second will be in De Brigard’s lines.”

“Yes,” she said, doing her best to meet his mood of calm-eyed practicality.

“The officer will be the only man armed, of those five. I’ll attend to him. Before the other four can get to their carbines we’ll be off—*you’ll* be off, I mean, for remember, whatever happens, you are to get to that starting-lever and get away with the car. I’ll be holding the men off until we’re clear.”

“Clear of what?”

“Clear of that shed—and of the wharf. Then, once out of the town, we’ve got a clear run until we strike De Brigard’s outposts. It will be simply a matter of rushing them—and trusting to luck.”

“It’s hopeless,” she sobbed.

“To stay six more hours on this steamer is more hopeless!”

“Even if we did get through,” she tried to explain, “we couldn’t get into Guariqui. They would fire on a car breaking into their lines—they would kill us both, before they could understand!”

He shook his head dissentingly.

“We’ll have to warn them in some way that is only one of the smaller problems!”

He caught up his coat, and dropped a revolver

into each side pocket, and after them the loose cartridges, in handfuls.

Then, after another moment's thought, he crossed the cabin again, and leaned over the open trunk.

"I've got a pocketful of milk tablets here," he explained, "and a pound or two of German army chocolate."

He swung about and looked at her, with his almost boyish smile.

"And I'm terribly sorry, but it isn't sweetened!" he said. Although there was no answering smile on her face, he thought he saw a fleeting look of gratitude in her eyes, as though she was struggling to thank him for even his foolish and futile efforts at lightheartedness. And while she still gravely looked up at him he slipped his huge wicker-covered brandy-flask into his hip pocket, and once more consulted his watch.

"Our time is up!" he said, with every semblance of levity suddenly fading from his face. It tortured him to see such resigned hopelessness in her quiet eyes, but he knew it was perilous to surrender to his feelings.

"I know it's hard," was all he said, "but it has to be done."

"I understand," she said.

He turned, with his hand on the light-switch.

“Is there anything you feel you ought to take along with you?”

“Nothing,” she whispered.

“Then are you ready?”

“Quite ready,” was her answer.

She heard the snap of the light-switch. She heard him quietly turn the key in the cabin door. She knew, as she stood with her hand on his sleeve, that he was listening and waiting for the sentry’s steps. He waited until they passed and died away toward the bow of the ship. Then he noiselessly opened the door and drew her out after him into the blackness of the balmy, musky-odoured midnight air.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE FLIGHT

THEY crept across the deck, hand in hand, to where the shadowy outlines of one of the life-boats blocked their path. They slipped in under the bow of this life-boat, groping their way to the davit, where the ship's rail ended. Before them was a drop of six feet, from the ship's deck to the string-piece of the pier, against which the rusty side-plates were creaking and groaning.

McKinnon made a sudden motion for the girl to wait, for dark figures were moving about on the pier below. She could make out the gloomy mass of the weigh-scales shed, its oxid-red paint leaving it black by night. She could see that the west door of the shed was open, and that a figure stood just inside this door, holding a lantern. She knew it was the officer, for she could see the light glimmer on the sword-scabbard that moved back and forth with every movement of his body. She could see, too, that

he was contentedly smoking a cigarette. She could even smell the tobacco smoke, mingled with the heavy odour of a decaying shipment of bananas that rotted farther out along the pier-edge.

She could hear low voices, now and then, speaking cautiously in Spanish, as two bare-footed soldiers padded past the swinging lantern, in through the door. They carried a heavy box that reminded her of a baby's coffin; and as they came out again two others passed them on their way in.

Then she felt McKinnon touch her arm, warningly, and heard his quick whisper for her to be ready. She could also hear the slow tread of the sentry's feet behind her, to the north of the shielding life-boat.

"Now's our chance," McKinnon was saying in her ear. He dropped silently over the deck-edge. She could just make out the white patch of his face as he stood there waiting to lift her down.

She knew no emotion, beyond a vague and persistent anxiety, as she felt his arms clasp her surrendering body. The moment's intimate contact brought her neither joy nor repugnance. She only knew that McKinnon was leading her by the hand to the far end of the shed that faced the west. Then he took away his hand, and

drew a revolver from his pocket. It struck her that the odour from the rotting banana-pile was becoming almost unendurable.

She followed him blindly, her outstretched fingers keeping in touch with his coat-sleeve. She saw him step in over the railway-tracks that were bridged by the shed. A broken right angle of light, from the lantern within, outlined the huge, loosely fitting door that covered the west end of the black-boarded building. In this huge door a smaller one had at some time been cut; it was through this smaller door that McKinnon led her, cautiously, noiselessly.

The track-motor stood backed almost against the eastern end of the shed, next to the door through which the barefooted soldiers were carrying the heavy boxes. The officer with the lantern still kept his position, just inside this door, placidly smoking his cigarette.

The girl and McKinnon had to stoop low to keep in the shadow of the square-topped, heavy-bodied motor-car. They crouched in under its acetylenes, close to the rust-covered, many-dented circulating coil, as a cartridge-box was lifted into the body of the car by the two bare-footed carriers, with a muffled thump as the weight was released, and then the grating of wood against wood as the box was pushed and twisted and jerked into position. They could

hear the sigh of one of the men, the pad of bare feet, and the nonchalant "Forty-three, forty-four" of the counting officer.

It was then that McKinnon lifted her bodily into the driving-seat, whispering to her to sit low, even catching at her outstretched hand and conveying it to the starting-lever.

"Start as the door opens," she heard him whisper, and she knew that he had crept forward again, and that she was alone in the car. She tried to school herself to calmness, to coerce her attention on which was the starting-lever and which the speed-lever, to force into life the hope that all might still turn out well. Once free of that door, she felt, she could breathe again.

She waited, straining through the dim light, wondering what kept McKinnon so long.

Then the quietness was broken by the sudden sound of metal rasping on metal, of a falling piece of wood that echoed cavernously through the high-roofed shed.

"Who is there?" cried the startled officer, in Spanish, as he swung about with his lantern. He whipped out a revolver from his belt as he repeated the challenge. The door had not opened; they were shut in, trapped.

The officer sprang forward, holding the lantern out at his side as he ran. The girl's heart

stopped beating: it was over—it was the end of everything!

Then a sudden roar of sound filled the shed, followed by the crash of glass. It was a shot from McKinnon's revolver, a deliberate and well-put shot that shattered the lantern and left the place in darkness.

“Quick—come ahead!” called McKinnon, out of the darkness. As he spoke the officer emptied his revolver toward the sound of the intruder's voice. The shots, in rapid succession, filled the shed with tumult, left the air stifling with powder smoke. Quick calls and counter-calls came from the ship. The four barefooted soldiers, springing for their carbines, charged in through the narrow east door. They fired as they came, but only into utter darkness.

“Come ahead!” called McKinnon still again out of that darkness—she could not tell where. “Sit low, and take the door on the run!”

She hesitated, bewildered, for the command seemed a foolish one. The carbines were spitting close about her. She heard the cries of alarm, the deafening detonations, the crash of wood.

“For God's sake, come ahead!” implored McKinnon. She knew he was still safe. She no longer hesitated. She threw the starting-

lever back, threw the speed out full, and crouched low in the bottom of the car front. She knew that somebody was clubbing at the seat above her with a musket-end. She could hear the guns of the *Laminian*'s sentries giving the alarm. Then she closed her eyes, and crouched lower, for she knew the car was under way.

It had some fifteen or sixteen feet of headway before it struck the huge pine door that barred the tracks. There was a sudden rending and splintering of pine, a crunching of wood, and the car had gone through the door like a hound through a paper hoop.

McKinnon swung up beside her as the door went down. He was astride her body almost, fighting and panting, for a swarthy-faced Locombian was on the car-step, making frenzied thrusts at her with his carbine-end. Another was on the cartridge-boxes, and he shot once, scorching the operator's face with his powder-flash as it passed him. He had no time for a second shot, for McKinnon's hand went up and his revolver barked. The carbine fell forward into the seat between them. The Locombian himself rolled sideways, to the left, with a howl of pain. He staggered to his feet, swayed there a second, and then toppled backward over the boxes, and fell from the car.

Another man took his place as he fell. McKinnon sprang for him, catching and jerking upward the barrel of his carbine as he fired, tearing a hole through the car-roof.

Then the two men closed, and as they fought and tore at each other in the swerving and pounding car, the sentries from the ship's bow kept firing along the dark track.

Then a third man, the officer who had held the lantern, swung from the now racing car's hand-rail forward, until he reached the driving-seat. He had taken out his sword—the girl could see the white steel glimmer in the dim light. The thought flashed through her, as she saw it, that swords were foolish and obsolete weapons. She had always looked on them as mere ornaments of dress, as useless as an epaulette. But now she knew that she had been mistaken, for she could see the agile little officer whipping and slashing with his naked blade as he climbed and worked his way up to the box-pile, and the nearness of that glimmering steel intimidated her even more than a carbine-flash could.

It must have been several seconds before she realised that the slashing sword-end was meant for her, that the frenzied little figure was beating and prodding through the darkness in an effort to reach her own shrinking body. Mc-

Kinnon's revolver lay in the bottom of the car; the girl could feel it with her shaking hands. There was only one thing to do.

She quickly raised it, closed her eyes, and fired. The shot went wide, for she had aimed it low, at his knees. But it served to fix her position in the mind of her assailant; and again she saw the naked steel flash and shimmer in the darkness. She fired again, before it had time to reach her.

She knew the bullet had broken his arm, even before his grasp on the hand-rail relaxed. She saw him sway back, helplessly, and then topple and fall outward, against the stringpiece of the pier. She stood up, and looked back for her companion. She could just make out the two men still struggling back and forth, doggedly, determinedly. Then she heard a short scream of agony, for one of the strugglers had caught a forefinger of the other and levered it resolutely back, until it snapped and broke at the third joint. Then, even before that cry of pain died away, she saw one man raise the other up, bodily, and bring him down with all his remaining strength on the close-packed cartridge-boxes. The blow seemed to stun him; before his senses came back to him his panting adversary had taken advantage of that helplessness,

and was rolling and pushing him out from the back of the racing car.

He remained so long there at the rear of the car, gasping and fighting for breath again, that the waiting girl was in doubt as to who had been the victor. Then he called to her, and she understood.

She lowered the revolver, slowly, as he clambered weakly back over the boxes, and dropped in the seat beside her.

“Are you hurt?” he gasped.

“No!” she said. But the sound was more like a sob. The siren of the *Laminian* was now screaming and bellowing out through the velvety black quietness of the midnight waterfront. The sentries on the ship were still shooting after them, foolishly, and adding to the intermittent uproar. But the car, by this time, had covered more than half of the mile-long pier. A land-breeze, balmy and many-odoured, blew in their faces. On either side of them, through the darkness, pulsed the ghostly white lacework of the beach-surf.

“Thank God, we’re free!” said McKinnon devoutly.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE COUNTER-FORCES

McKINNON's cry of thankfulness was cut short by an exclamation from the girl at his side as the car rocked and swayed along the uneven pier-track.

"Look!" she gasped. "They are closing the gates ahead of us! They are shutting us in!"

McKinnon peered through the darkness. He could see a number of moving lights; they shifted about through the gloom, small and restless, like fire-flies. He could also make out the shadowy lines of a building or two. Where the track ran between these buildings, at the end of the pier, a white-painted wooden gate had been swung and locked across the rails to stop the car. He could see the light from the restlessly moving lanterns refracted from its painted slats, from the swords of the officers and the rifles of the waiting soldiers.

He knew what it meant, but it was too late for half-measures. With the quickness of

thought he jerked down two of the heavy cartridge-boxes, to the left side of the driving-seat, as a barricade against a chance bullet. He felt sure it would be only a chance bullet; his contempt for both the arms and the marksmanship of the Latin-American was of long standing. He hauled and twisted and rolled two boxes as quickly down on the right-hand end of the driving-seat, calling to the girl at his side to crouch down between his knees as he reached out and took the speed-lever in his own hand.

Alicia had instinctively slowed down the car, for the moving lights were now not more than two hundred feet before them. McKinnon, with his foot held ready on the brakes, threw the motor out to full speed. He no longer felt afraid of the flimsy wooden gate. What he feared was a tie across the track or a switch thrown open to derail him. And any moment, he felt, as the heavy car gathered speed and once more hurled itself forward, they would start shooting at him with their pot-metal rifles.

He crouched lower and lower between his barricade of boxes as the car swung in toward the shadowy pier-end, so that his stooping body forced the girl to the very floor of the driving-seat. He saw a red tongue or two of flame dart

out of the blackness ahead of him, and he knew that the firing had begun. He could hear the whine of the bullets as they passed overhead; he could hear the lead ping and pound against the car-sides. He had little fear for the boxes of ammunition surrounding him; the cartridges were covered enough by the powdered fluxing-slag to be cushioned against concussion. Once, indeed, a bullet splintered against the wood of the very box against which he leaned. He held his breath and waited, racking and swinging onward toward the moving lights.

But still the firing kept up. The white-painted gate before him seemed a mirage, which receded as he advanced. It seemed that he would never get to it. And he knew what a bullet might do at any moment. He carried no lights, and he felt certain that as yet the men attacking him had nothing against which to centralise their fire. But as he came closer, he knew that this advantage would be lost. Then it suddenly occurred to him that a show of resistance would be a possible help to him. He had no time to feel for one of the carbines that still lay somewhere about the bottom of the car. But his groping fingers found the revolver on the car-seat cushion behind them.

Before his arm could go up, however, he knew that it was too late. The fire was pouring in

on them broadside; he could hear the whistle of the bullets and the splintering of the car-hood sides. He had ridden down the lights and the waiting men.

The stabbing and jetting and drifting powder smoke obscured the gate so that they were upon it before he knew it. There was a second rending and snapping of wood, a vision of flying white pickets, a cry from the soldiers on either side of him. But the car had passed its second barrier, carrying away one end of the framework across its battered lamps.

McKinnon took a deep breath and waited with his foot still on the brake, oppressed by the terror of a sudden derailment. But the great car kept to the tracks and went thundering in between the shadowy buildings that mercifully shut them off from the grilling rifle-fire of De Brigard's men. He knew, by the passing of the thunderous echo, that they were in the open again, circling up through the scattering lines of mud huts. The sound of a shot or two still came to his ears. He could feel the girl move; she was trying to rise to the seat. But he held her there between his knees as the car continued to plunge and sway along the crooked tracks. Now and then the howling of dogs came to his ears, breaking through the continuous monotone of the wind's rush past his face,

straining and peering into the darkness ahead. Far out in the roadstead the *Laminian*'s siren was still bellowing and roaring. An answering steam-whistle, somewhere in the east, took up the stentorian complaint; lights began to appear in the houses of the wakened town.

Alicia, still pinned down by his knees, was struggling and calling to him. He knew that she was safe, that she was still unharmed, and that was all he cared to know.

“Hurry!” she called to him.

“Yes,” he answered, leaning closer to catch her words.

“We circle about the town,” she was calling into his ear. “We have to come out by Point Asuncion, next to the new hospital. There will be guards there. They can cross from the pier-end almost as soon as we can circle around!”

“It’s out to the last notch,” McKinnon explained, and she had to steady herself in the reeling car by suddenly catching at his arm.

“They’ll try to stop us there!” she called out to him once more.

“They can’t!” he called back recklessly, almost drunkenly, for the speed of their escape seemed to have gone to his head. “They can’t!”

He suddenly forced her down to her former position, between his sheltering knees, for his

straining eyes had once more caught sight of moving lanterns ahead.

The girl was right! They had passed through the heart of the town, and were once more on its ragged outskirts. They were following a little embankment of made land, of a filled-in swamp-side, littered with cinders and scrap-iron. McKinnon could see the oily glimmer of water beneath him, to the right. To the left, the ghostlike chimney and walls of a powerhouse floated past, and were lost behind them, as the car rumbled over a culvert and ground and bit with its wheel-flanges on the curve that took them sweeping in again toward Point Asuncion. But all the while his eyes were on the moving lights ahead.

Suddenly he uttered a startled cry, a cry that had more resentment than fear in it. Then he stood up in his seat, reaching back for one of the carbines as he rose. For the drifting and shifting lights had defined themselves. He had made out the meaning of the movement that he had to face.

It was a body of uniformed men carrying a bridge-girder of iron. And he knew that girder was meant to stop his flight. His last doubt as to his enemy's intention disappeared with the sudden *pinging* of a rifle-bullet through the darkness above him.

He ducked low as he heard the sound, and brought his carbine into play. Throwing the old-fashioned magazine-lever down and back, he took quick but careful aim at the moving lanterns, light by light. It was not until his magazine was empty that he dropped the weapon and caught up his revolver. His shots were going wild, he knew, but he did not stop. He saw the moving lights come to a halt, almost beside the track-edge. He saw one of them go down and scatter, and the oil break into flames. He saw the remaining lights waver, draw back, and disperse. And the girder fell as the men wavered and retreated. But it did not fall on the rails.

He swept past where it lay beside the burning oil, six good feet from the track. He heard the hasty volley they tried to pour in on him, broadside, as he went. But they had nothing more than a racing shadow for a target, and the car had thundered past before they could make a second move. He felt the girl clasping his knee; whether from fright or weakness or gratitude at their deliverance he could not tell. Nor did he care to ask as he helped her up into the seat.

They were clear of the town now, and in the open country. A long level stretch of swamp-land, musky-smelling, miasmal, blanketed with

a feverous night-mist, stretched before them. McKinnon knew that no courier could overtake them. He remembered that no wires ran from Puerto Locombia inland, that the coast was cut off from the hinterland, that they were comparatively safe until they had climbed the Height of Land and Guariqui itself came in sight. Then there would be the Liberal army's lines to run, De Brigard's sentinels to pass. Then, if all went well, their journey would be at an end. Getting into Guariqui would mean one last risk and one last fight; but in the meantime they were safe.

He lessened the mad speed of the car a little, wondering, for the first time, if they carried enough gasoline to see them to their journey's end. The more he thought over that problem of gasoline supply the more it disturbed him. With his tank once empty they would be stranded in a hostile country, in which there would be no hiding, from which there could be no escape. The mere terrifying thought of such a contingency caused him to throw out the speed-lever a notch or two. He noticed, as they plunged on and on through the quietness of the night, that his hands were cut and scratched, that his face was caked with dried blood, that his body was sore and stiff. But deep within him was a persistent and unquenchable glow

of exhilaration, something more than mere speed-drunkenness and mere thankfulness for delivery from past dangers.

It was the world-old and primordial joy in accomplishment, the intoxication of conquest implanted in him by a thousand fighting ancestors. And he felt at his side the tired and overtaxed body of the woman for whom he was battling; and as she swayed there with the swaying of the car, letting her weight fall against his shoulder and then recede from it, this feeling that might have been nothing more than pagan exultation was touched and transformed into something higher. The air beat against their faces, side by side; nocturnal moths flattened against their clothing and were held there by the wind.

McKinnon could see that they were beginning to climb, now that the swamp-land had been left behind, and that leaves and palm-fronds were rustling on either side of them. The air seemed to grow clearer, the darkness less abysmal. He could see that they were at last on the edge of the banana-belt, still climbing and pounding and swaying upward. Their path was now a lonely aisle through the forest of rustling greenery that crowded up to the very track-edge; sometimes a leaf swept the car-roof. At times they could hear the ripple of water in the

irrigation ditches. Once a light swung across the track, a mile ahead. It brought the lever out to full speed again, and a carbine ready, and the two figures in the car lower down behind their barricade. A voice shouted to them, petulantly, out of the darkness as they swept past, but that was all.

They were grinding and screeching on a curve again, before McKinnon could lessen the speed. As they swept around the sharp quarter-circle, the car descended on what must have been a grazing burro or a steer. The heavy framework shuddered with the force of the impact; there was an animal-like sound, half-groan, half-grunt, as the obstructing black mass was thrown aside. McKinnon felt a spurt of blood flung up in his face, and the next moment held his breath, for he knew they had sped out on a cobweb of steel that bridged the cañonlike bed of a river. But still they kept on, up and up, until the gradient began to tell on the motor and the air grew perceptibly cooler. Forest trees were about them now, and they could hear the startled call of birds and the cry of monkeys. Once a jaguar called out through the night, and once, as they swept past a sleeping village of little white huts, they saw the glow of coals in an open mud oven.

But still the flying wheels carried them up

and up until they could see behind them the vague glimmer of the Caribbean, and the star-light grew so clear that McKinnon could make out the woman's locked hands in her lap at his side. He felt her shiver with the cold, and forced her to drink a little of the liquor from his brandy-flask. Then he groped about, looking for a covering, for he knew that as the altitude grew greater the cold would increase. Under the seat-cushions he found an oilskin coat, and helped her into it. The coat was much too large for her, but he doubled it over, in front, and held it in with a cushion-strap about her waist.

He noticed, for the first time, that they were both hatless. And as he began to feel the penetrating chill creep into his own bones, he swallowed a mouthful of brandy and buttoned his coat close up to his throat. But they were still racing on, up and up toward the Cordilleras. And he thanked what gods he thought were watching over him that the gasoline had held out, and that the car had kept to its tracks.

A cluster of three or four lights showed ahead, on their left, and brought a little cry from the girl.

“That's Paraiso!” she called out to him. “The road divides here. We must take the track to the right.”

“That means a switch!” called McKinnon, slowing down.

“We have to circle Paraiso Hill,” she explained. Then she stood up, with her hand on his shoulder, and peered ahead through the darkness.

“And on the other side of Paraiso Hill is Guariqui,” she said.

It startled him to see that she was crying a little, for no accountable reason, as she sat back in her seat at his side.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE DISPUTED TRAIL

McKINNON kept slowing the car down, at the repeated warning of Alicia, until they did nothing more than creep along the rails. No lights were to be seen now, and the heavy foliage on either side of the track left them in what was almost an unbroken tunnel of darkness.

So McKinnon leaned out over the side of the slowly moving car, waiting for the telltale *chug* of the wheels against the metal of the switch-points. They groped their way on for a quarter of a mile at this snail's pace before this telltale jolt told them the wheel-flanges had struck and swerved against the "points." The switch was set for the left-hand track, so they had to reverse and back away again, coming to a standstill some ten or twelve paces east of the switch-stand target. Then McKinnon went forward to reconnoitre, leaving the girl, with the revolver, to guard the car.

He made two discoveries as he crept hur-

riedly about the track in the darkness. The first was that the switch was locked. The closed padlock resisted his fiercest tugs and wrenches. He had to compel himself to calmness and demand of his jaded intelligence some more adequate means of attack.

He returned to the car, after a moment of thought, and groped about until he found one of the army-rifles lying between the cartridge-boxes. Then he felt his way back to the switch, and worked his gun-end carefully in through the lock-chain. It did not take him long, using his carbine-barrel as a crowbar, to pry and twist the lever free.

His second discovery was a more alarming one. Standing on the Guariqui track, blocking his way, was a flat-car. This car was piled high with roughly hewn sticks of logwood. To push any such dead weight as this ahead of them to Guariqui was out of the question. He knew it would have to be hauled back and side-tracked on the rails to the left. Whether or not it was beyond the strength of his motor only an actual test could tell.

He found a chain binding the logwood-pile together, and after a few minutes of hard work this chain was securely attached to his car-axle and hooked over the coupling-pin of the flat-car.

But try as he might, the obstacle was not to be removed. The loaded car refused to stir. One of its wheels, pocketed in a half-inch depression caused by a flattened rail-end, held it anchored to the spot. His motor, sulking and back-firing under the unnatural strain, was not strong enough for the task. And he was sorely afraid of injuring his engine and finding himself broken down and helpless on the very outskirts of De Brigard's lines. He saw that there was nothing to do but unload the flat-car where it stood.

Alicia would have helped him at that slow and dreary labour, but he pointed out to her the necessity of standing on guard while he worked. The rough-hewn sticks of logwood seemed heavy beyond belief. Some of them, which he could not lift, he had to work slowly outward and let fall from the side of the car. He also had to make sure that every log and stick fell clear of the track.

His muscles ached, his fingers seemed without joints, his strength was gone. Twice he had to resort to heavy drafts from his brandy-flask.

But he worked on, doggedly, sullenly, arguing with himself that he ought to be grateful that he was gaining his end without being discovered, picturing what such labour would be under the fire of a dozen half-breed sharp-

shooters at short range. Then he tried to console himself with the thought that his gasoline had held out, that another seven-mile dash would see them pounding their way into Guariqui. And once in Guariqui was safety, and rest, and sleep—above all things, sleep. There would first be good hot coffee, in plenty, and food. And then he would be given a bed somewhere. The thought of that bed seemed the most consoling of all. It suggested a Nirodha of utter indifference after a night of utter anguish; it grew to symbolise an utter Nirvana of rest for his over-wearied body.

But a new fear suddenly stabbed through him as he stooped and laboured so doggedly over his lumbering sticks of logwood. Would daylight come before they were on their way again? Were they to be caught and trapped, after all, by the rising sun?

His watch had run down; in the excitement of the last twenty hours he had neglected to wind it. All sense of time had long since passed from him.

He turned and looked up at the sky. It seemed to him that the great velvet dome studded with silver star-points was less opaque, was more luminous, than it had been. The eastern horizon was shut off from him by a wall of heavy foliage; he could see no telltale line

of breaking light. But it seemed to him that the darkness about him was waning, merging into a gray and ghostlike translucence. Somewhere out of the distance, as he looked, came the sound of a rooster crowing.

There was something incongruous in the trivial everydayness of that casual cock-crow. Yet this ludicrously commonplace sound sent a tingle of terror through him. It caused him to turn back to his ragged and ponderous slabs of logwood, lifting and tearing at them until blood dripped from his bruised finger-ends and his head swam as with a vertigo.

He leaped back, suddenly, with a galvanic start, as though the log at which he clutched had been a power-circuit. For close beside him stood the figure of Alicia, ghost-like in the uncertain grayness about them.

“The light’s coming,” she warned him. “I must help you.”

“No—no,” he cried, knowing such work was beyond her strength, “you must go back to the car! For God’s sake, guard the car!”

“But you can’t do it—you can’t keep this up!” she cried, in pitying protest.

“Go back to the car this is my work and I’m going to finish it!”

The maddening thought that a new enemy,

this relentless enemy of light, was on his heels, turned him back to his work, frenziedly, until his heart pounded like a trip-hammer under his aching breast-bone, and his breath, in that rarefied atmosphere, came with short, painful gasps.

He had to resort to his brandy-flask before he could reach the car again. There he rested for a precious minute or two, explaining to Alicia that he would pry against the empty flat-car's wheel with a logwood stick, while she hauled and tugged at its lower end with the reversed motor.

It was perilous work, calling for the utmost caution lest one fault of judgment undo all his labour. It was a moment when everything hung in the balance, when one grain of ill-luck would send the beam swinging up against them. But an inarticulate little cry burst from him as he saw the black mass slowly yield, and then move, inch by languid inch. He heard the grind of the rusty wheel-flanges against the switch-points, and knew that he had won.

Then the operation was repeated, when once the switch had been cleared and the lever thrown over, and again the stubborn flat-car was pried and pushed into motion. When it came to a standstill, it was left resting well off to the left of the switch, with the road to Guariqui once more open.

CHAPTER XXX

THE LAST DITCH

McKINNON's ears were ringing, and his head still swam a little, as he climbed into the track-motor's driving-seat. He noticed, too, as they gathered speed, that he was wet with sweat, and that the cool mountain air was sending a chill into his very bones.

“Look! It's daylight coming!” cried the girl at his side. He peered out through the phantasmal grayness that lightened about them, and a new anxiety crept and corroded through all his aching body. There would be no appreciable period of friendly twilight. The tropics, he knew, would explode the full light of day on them like a rocket. And between him and safety still lay seven miles of track.

“It will have to be full speed now—to the end,” he told the girl.

She called back, “Yes—I know,” as the lever went to the last notch and the car racked and pounded along the uneven rails. The forest fell

away, and they came into a more broken country, winding and twisting between bald and rocky hills, past coffee-farms from which early awakened dogs barked out at them. But the ragged-hooded car raced and pounded forward, taking the sharp curves with a scream of protest, striking with malignant heels at every passing switch-point. Then the light grew stronger; they could see a more orderly and level country studded with *rancho* and *hacienda*, and a crooked, sun-baked road, white with dust, and broken walls, and clumps of stunted trees.

Then the girl gave a cry and caught at his arm.

“Guariqui!” she said, pointing toward the northwest. He had no time to look, for at the same moment his own eyes had caught sight of something which filled him with an even more compelling emotion.

Before the rocky hill-crests toward which they were sweeping, he caught sight of a row of smoke columns and the serried white splashes of tent walls against the yellow-gray of the parched fields. He leaped to his feet as he saw it. He surrendered the lever recklessly, and turned and struggled with one of the cartridge-boxes on the row behind them. He pulled and tugged and worked it quickly forward, to heighten the barricade on the right-hand side

of the car, for he knew they were charging down on De Brigard's camp. He realised that their climacteric moment was at hand, that the time for their last dash across the enemy's lines had come.

Already he could see the pacing sentries as they met and countermarched between the scattered splashes of white. He could see the corralled horses and mules of De Brigard's cavalry feeding together. As the car raced on, he could even make out groups of men in ragged uniform, barefooted, squatting about the camp-fires.

Some of them he could see stooping quietly over black pots; one group was splashing and washing at a long wooden water-trough. There seemed something tranquil in the scene, something strangely unlike the way of war in the slowly rising smoke columns, in the slowly moving barefooted men, in the *ranchos* of palm and tree-boughs, in the water-trough and the tranquilly feeding horses and mules.

Then the scene changed, with the quickness of a stage-picture. The cue for that change came with a challenge from a sentry and then a single rifle-shot from a second sentry on guard further along the track-edge. The camp changed with that shot.

It seemed to McKinnon like the sudden

change that swept through his coherer-dust when vitalised with its magnetic current. The sentry, in the meantime, repeated the shot, three times, until the man in the charging car stood up and returned his fire, sharply, driving him to cover.

But the alarm had been given. The tree-clumps and the broken stone walls seemed to swarm with men; the white tents became strangely like hornets' nests disgorging excited occupants. The barefooted idlers grouped about the camp-fires no longer watched the pots and splashed about the water-trough. They became armed irregular infantry; they were suddenly transformed into a vindictive and resolute-minded company whose one purpose in life was to pour lead into a huge, rusted, bullet-rid-dled track-motor that had ridden down their sentries and broken into their very lines.

For one incongruous moment McKinnon had felt vaguely sorry for those lean and hungry-looking and unkempt idlers in dirty denim uniforms. He had thought of them as homeless and unhappy men who were being made the tools of forces which they could not comprehend. Now they seemed to him dancing and running brown-faced fiends, doing their best to put a bullet through the head of a stranger who was very tired and hungry, and a little tipsy,

perhaps, from immoderate drafts of brandy on a wofully empty stomach.

He saw them, as in a dream, but he scarcely gave them a thought. All he knew was that the woman huddled down at his side was still safe, and his car was still under way. Beyond that, he knew, nothing counted. Death had snapped at his heels too often and too closely that night; he was supremely contemptuous of their fire-cracker powder and their pot-metal guns. He wanted to get to Guariqui and have something to eat, and then sleep for twenty good hours. And the racing of the car made him dizzy. And every bone in his body ached. And he wondered how long he would have to keep shooting.

Then he sat back, with a sigh, and rested his arms. He noticed that his gun-barrel was hot to the touch. He noticed, too, that the noise of the shooting was not so disquietingly loud in his ears. It began to dawn on his dazed mind that they had faced the worst of the fight. He began to understand that they had forced their way through De Brigard's lines, that they were swinging up to the outskirts of the capital, that they were to reach Guariqui, after all.

Then he remembered pounding out over a narrow iron bridge, under which flashed and rippled a little stream as blue as a robin's egg.

It made him think, for a moment, how thirsty he was, how much he would give for a hatful of that rippling blue water. Then all thought of the stream passed from his indifferent mind, for before him he could see walls, white walls and blue walls and pink walls, and above them huddled red roofs, and the dark green of tree-tops, and a yellow cathedral-tower, and still farther away a coppered roof-dome glimmering like a ball of fire in the slanting sunlight. Then he heard a bugle call, and call again, sweet as silver, like a voice out of a dream.

That mellow and trailing note was punctuated by the sudden blow-like sounds of rifle-shots, from somewhere amid the soft white and blue and pink of the very walls ahead of him. He saw the track-ballast about him leap and erupt into ominous little clouds of flying dust. Ulloa's outposts were shooting at him, from Guariqui. They were under fire, from their own people.

“Quick!” he called to the girl. “Show a flag!”

“How?” she asked, not understanding.

“Tie it to a carbine-end! Quick!”

“Tie what?” she called in his ear.

“A flag—a white flag—*anything* white!”

He knew, the next moment, that she was tearing a linen underskirt from her own limbs. He

could see her quick fingers rip it into an oblong of fluttering white. He stooped for the carbine that lay in the car-bottom, and as he stooped he heard the girl call to him.

It was a call of something more than alarm. It was terror, unthinking and abject terror.

He was back at her side in a second: his first sickening thought was that a bullet had reached her.

But he saw only her outstretched hand, pointing foolishly and vaguely to something in front of her. He saw her wide and staring eyes, as she crouched down and back, lower and lower in the driving-seat, as though preparing herself for some vast and overwhelming blow.

He whipped about and followed the line of that terrified stare. Then he understood what it meant. He saw where the two lines of the narrow-gauge track came to an end; he saw where some half-dozen lengths of rails had been torn away, and tossed to one side. He saw the track, on which they rode, the track which he had come to regard as something fixed and stable, as something permanent as the earth itself, end in nothing.

His foot went down on the emergency brake, viciously, at the same moment that his outflung arm threw the speed lever off. He knew, even then, that it was all useless, that it was all too

late. But he acted subconsciously, automatically. He knew what was coming, even before the wheel-flanges dropped from the rail-end and lunged and shook and pounded along the sleepers. He braced himself and held tight, as the girl was doing—praying, all the while, that the rushing thing of steel would not overturn.

But a forward wheel gave way, under the strain, and the car-floor suddenly dipped under them, dipped and bowed until the axle locked against a cross-tie with a jolt that sent the great hulk careening sideways, where it raised and rolled over in the yellow sand, ponderously, indignantly, like an ill-treated animal.

McKinnon caught the girl as she fell on him, with a sharp out-swinging motion. But he swung and tumbled her free of the car, away from the menace of the toppling cartridge-boxes. Then he rolled over on his face, and crawled to the girl's side, on all fours, with the grit of yellow sand between his teeth and the choking smart of the dust-cloud still in his gasping lungs.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE LAST HOPE

McKINNON's fall seemed to shock him into new life. The very abruptness of his disaster brought with it a renewed appreciation of danger. His mind became alert again, with the peevish alertness of febrility, as though, like the long-taxed body, it were capable of coming into a sort of second-wind.

He realised what had happened, for he was thinking clearly and quickly now. He could see the whole thing, and see it only too well. De Brigard's men had had the forethought to break the one line of communication between Guariqui and the coast. This end had been achieved easily enough, by the mere uprooting of a few lengths of track. He had ridden into that open trap, without thought. He had demanded too much of Destiny. Luck had at last gone against him, as it must in the end go against every man who insists on taking his chances.

They were alone there, he and the girl he

was trying to save, under the hot morning sun of an open and unprotected country. They were stranded on a slope of yellow ballast-sand, face to face with a guerilla army that would refuse them quarter, under the walls of a beleaguered city that would decline to admit them. Yes, he had asked too much of Fate. There was nothing left to him, now, but to fight it out, fight it out to a finish.

The next clearly defined thought that came to him was that he was burning with thirst. Before everything else, he felt, he must have water. And there remained only one hope of water. That was the little stream two hundred yards behind them, the flashing little ribbon of blue over which De Brigard's men would be swarming at any moment.

There was no time to be lost. His first task was to make his way to that stream and back—to fight his way there and back, if need be. He could not hold out, he knew, without water.

He dodged and peered and groped about the overturned car, in feverish search for anything that would hold water. That hurried search seemed a hopeless one, until his eyes fell on a battered gasoline-can of galvanised tin, stowed away under the seat-frame. He got the screw-top off its cover, in some way, and let its contents bubble out on the yellow sand as he swung

about the car again. The moment he did so the sharp, complaining *pinnnnng* of a bullet sounded close over his head. It had come from the west, from Guariqui. Before he could dodge in under the far side of the car-body it was repeated, again, and still again. One of Duran's own men, he knew, was picking at him from a housetop.

He found the girl, as he dodged back into shelter, sitting against the floor of the overturned car. Her face was colourless, and her eyes unnaturally large.

"Is this the end?" she asked, as he caught up one of the carbines half-smothered in sand at her feet.

"The end?" he cried. "No, it's not the end!"

"What can I do?" she asked.

"We've got to have water—and I'm going to get it! Keep close to that car until I get back!"

"But they'll cut you off; they'll——"

He had not waited to hear her. He was running out across the open and undulating ground, bending low as he ran. She could easily follow his moving black shadow, in the glare of the open sunlight. She heard a scattering of rifle-shots further eastward as he crossed a stretch of higher ground. Then she saw him drop to his knee. Her first thought was that

he was wounded. But the next moment she beheld him bring his rifle into action, and then run forward, and repeat the movement, and again run forward. Then he ducked lower, and rose again, and suddenly dropped down into the bed of the creek, completely out of sight.

He remained there for what seemed an interminable length of time to her. The vicious snapping and popping of the distant guns crept ominously closer, second by second. They would be on him, she felt, before he could escape. They would cut him off before he could even climb from the creek-bed.

Then, in the clear light, she saw his head emerge. She caught sight of him worming cautiously back, dodging and rounding into each land-depression. The gun-shots began again, until they became a rhythm of hollow sound, like quick and impatient hammer-pounds on a plank. She saw that he was wet to the knees, and breathing hard, as he stumbled back to the car.

Then, as she saw the wet and dripping can, all her being was centred on the thought of her own thirst, of how her dry throat ached and throbbed for water. She scarcely noticed that the firing had ceased, that the line of skulking and scattered figures had fallen mysteriously away. She only knew that McKinnon had

dropped that precious water-can in front of her.

The next moment he was hauling and tearing at the overturned cartridge-boxes. At first, as she looked up and saw his hollow and exultant eyes, she thought he had lost his reason, that pain and fatigue and hunger had left him hopelessly mad. But as she watched his struggles she knew there was a method in them.

For he was dragging and hauling the heavy boxes into a line directly before the overturned car. Then, with a railway-spike and a musket-end, he pried the tops from those boxes which came most readily apart, and poured the dross and cartridges out, in one heap. Then he flung the end of a broken car-step to the girl.

“Quick!” he commanded, kicking a box towards her. “Fill these with sand!”

She did as he ordered, scooping up the yellow sand with the fragment of flat iron, while he dragged more cartridge-boxes from the car-wreck and built up a little three-sided wall about the spot where she dug. His movements, at times, took him beyond the bulwark of the overturned car, and each time he thus exposed himself the man from the Guariqui housetop sniped at him, calmly and viciously.

“This is our only chance,” he hurriedly explained, as he ducked irritably back out of fire and tugged and hauled and lifted at his boxes.

"Our chance for what?" she asked, as she worked.

"For holding out—for keeping them back—for saving this ammunition for Guariqui!"

He was now taking the boxes as she filled them, and piling them one above the other on the outside of his roughly built wall, as an armour-belt protection for his serried cartridge-cases. He was afraid of what a bullet at close range might do to those cartridges. And all the while, slowly and methodically, the Guariqui sharpshooter was picking at him, as he showed himself outside the shadow of the car-wreck.

"We can hold them off, I tell you!" McKinnon was exulting, as he left a narrow embrasure in his three-foot battlement, by pushing two of the boxes a few inches apart. "We've got a fort here! We're as safe as Guariqui is! They can't get in behind us, because Ulloa's men are waiting there, and they know it! They've got to come at us from the front! And we're safe behind this—it's as safe as a stone wall! And we've got ammunition—a ton of it, if we need it!"

He was hauling at more of the boxes, building his side-walls now.

One of the Guariqui sharpshooter's bullets whined in over his head, within a foot of where

he worked. He swung about and shook his fist at his unseen enemy, irritably, impotently.

“You fool!” he cried. “You fool!—wasting powder on the people who’re tryin’ to save you!”

“We can’t save them!” said the woman, gray with dust, weak with hunger, sick with fear. But she worked on, mechanically, doggedly.

“We’ve got to!” exulted McKinnon, as he took the last box of sand from her. “We’ve got to hold out until the *Princeton* lands her men and gets them up into the hills here! It’s simply a matter of time! We can hold out here as well as in Guariqui! We’re safe here! And we’ve got water!”

“But no food!” she said.

“Wait!” he cried again. “The chocolate! And the milk-tablets! It’s enough! And here’s brandy, see—half a cupful of brandy left!”

“But how long will that last?”

“It will last as long as we need it—until nightfall, anyway!” he declared, as he crawled back to the car and dragged the remaining rifle out from under the fallen boxes.

“But if the *Princeton*’s men are not here by night?” she asked.

He seemed to resent her note of hopelessness.

“They *will* be here by night! They’ve *got* to be here! They should be at Puerto Locombia

by five this afternoon. They'll commandeer a Fruit Concern locomotive from the roundhouse there, and be up here by sunset—before sunset!"

She forced herself to believe him. She struggled to catch at some shadow of his hopefulness.

"Then what more must I do, to help?" she asked, very quietly. He was peering out over the rolling and sun-steeped plain.

"Eat—we must eat before those devils start back at us!" he said, as he caught up the can of gasoline-tainted water and gulped at it, savagely, for the sun by this time was cruelly hot overhead. Then he dragged out his brandy-flask, diluted its contents, and made the girl drink from it.

"If that fool back there'd only stop wasting powder!" he cried, as a bullet splattered against a car-wheel behind them. "They won't understand who we are, back there, until they see De Brigard's men coming in closer and closer, or trying to rush us. They won't know we're friends until they see us holding that guerilla mob off!"

"It can't be long now," said the girl, blinking out across the sun-steeped plain, where, in the distance, restless brown figures could be

seen once more moving and dispersing and concealing themselves along the land-dips.

"Then we must eat, before they come," he answered, putting the broken and crumpled pieces of army-chocolate out between them. The milk-tablets he decided to save for a second meal. Then he loaded the rifles, and laid them out ready, and placed the three revolvers on a box-top, with his pocketful of cartridges close beside them.

And they sat there on the yellow sand of their little rifle-pit, breakfasting on brandy-and-water and unsweetened chocolate, while they waited for the enemy to come up.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE LAST STAND

ALICIA was busy tying a strip of linen skirt into a cap for McKinnon's head, to protect him from the sun, when the firing began again.

It was not general, at first. It was more the spasmodic and desultory *pizzicato* of sound which foretells the readiness of the waiting orchestra. It began quietly, as a storm begins, yet there seemed little that was ominous about it. The listening girl wondered, as De Brigard's outposts worked their way closer and closer in towards the creek-bed, if she had not become half-inured to the tumult of musketry.

McKinnon, watching at the embrasure, conceded them any territory that lay beyond the creek-brink. It was wasting time and powder, he knew, to attempt to hold them back from that little stream-bottom. He only too poignantly realised the limitations of his short-barrelled rifles of "Belgian Damascus." He was not altogether unfamiliar with that particular make

of arm. They were weapons which only too often left the detonation of thirty grains of powder a peril and converted bullet-trajectories into a thing of ever-changing wonder. But he had shown Alicia how to reload each of these rifles. He had also taught her the trick of dislodging a shell when it jammed—for many of the cartridges, after their sea-trip, were still damp and swollen.

But beyond the wavering line of that creek-bank, he determined, no man should advance unchallenged. Above all things, he knew, he had to keep his front clear.

“It’s ten to one they won’t come at us in force,” he explained to the girl crouched at his knees in the rifle-pit. “They won’t throw themselves on us until they know what we carry. But we’ve *got* to stop that first rush!”

It was a minute or two before she spoke, for a flurry of bullets came whistling and whimpering and quavering close in over their heads. One or two, McKinnon noticed, *chugged* ominously against the face of his sand-boxes. But most of them went high, foolishly high.

“Couldn’t I get to Guariqui?” the girl was asking. “Couldn’t I—with a white flag of some sort, to warn them?”

“These devils ’d never let you get twenty feet away. And it would do no good!”

“Why?” she asked.

“They’re helpless in there they’ve no ammunition!”

She compelled herself to calmness again.

“But surely they’ll know surely in time,” she murmured.

“Yes, they’ll know!” he answered, absently, for his squinting eyes were on the undulating sweep of open ground ahead of him. He could see little barefooted men in ragged denim uniforms, creeping and running from hollow to hollow, spreading out in an irregular line, like the fan-edge of a breaking side-swell.

“They’re coming keep low!” he said. And as he spoke he sighted and fired.

The response to that first fire of his was prompt, almost instantaneous. It brought a steady *crescendo* clatter of sound and a patter and throb of bullets against the pit-front.

McKinnon swung the emptied rifle back into the hands of the waiting girl and caught up its mate, with one movement of his body.

He was firing calmly and deliberately now, watching for each upthrust shoulder and advancing head as it rose above the dip of the creek-bottom.

Then the heads began to show thicker and faster, and it left him no time for deliberation. He pumped the lever and fired until his arms

ached. He chose his man and emptied his shell until the powder-smoke hung thick and acrid about the little rifle-pit, until his face was streaked and smutted with it, as though it had been lampblacked. He fired until his eyes smarted with the drifting fumes and his lungs ached with their stench. He fired until a sickening smell of scorching oil rose from the metal of his rifles and the empty shells littered the pit-bottom.

But in the end he held the dodging and shifting little denim-clad figures in check, puzzled by the fury of his fire. He swept his appointed ground clear. He allowed no worming and skulking rifleman to advance even twenty paces beyond the creek-bank.

They drew back under cover, bewildered, wondering how many men that overturned car could have held. The *staccato* of sound dwindled down to a sulky and intermittent dribble of reports. McKinnon saw it, with a shout of gratitude, for he knew that he had reached his utmost limit.

He staggered back to gulp down great swallows of tepid water from the gasoline-can which the girl was holding up for him. Then he helped her reload, and waited for the smoke to lift.

“Have they gone?” she asked.

"No," he told her, as he swung up to his embrasure again. "But they've found out just what they've got to face!"

"What will they do?"

"It looks as though they're going to try different tactics now. They'll take their time, after this, and try to grill us out. Don't give way, please! Don't imagine——"

But he did not stop to finish, for he braced his smoke-blackened shoulders and fired, and peered forward, and fired again, and still again.

"They think they can dishearten us, now, with sniping," he told her. "It'll be a waiting game, I'm afraid but you mustn't give way!"

The pallor of her face had disturbed and worried him. But what was disturbing him more was the thought that they might at any time bring up a field-gun, and end his last and only hope.

It was this fear that clung to him, and took the marrow out of his courage, and made the long, hot hours of mid-day seem purgatorial in their endlessness. But still he watched and sighted and fired, and reloaded, and fired again, grimly, doggedly, pertinaciously, giving them a counter-challenge for every challenge they sent in to him.

Then mid-day lengthened into afternoon, and

a disturbing weakness descended upon him. So he leaned against his embrasure and chewed milk-tablets, and fired when he saw a moving shadow to target into, or a threatening gun-arm to aim at, and made the white-faced girl eat her portion of the milk-tablets and drink the last of the brandy-and-water.

And as he watched the afternoon grew older, and the sun swung lower over Guariqui. But still he fired and reloaded and wondered if the *Princeton* had steamed into Puerto Locombia, and silently and devoutly prayed for help.

Then all thought of prayer went from his mind, for his squinting eyes had fallen on what looked like a salt-barrel as it appeared over the brink of the creek-bank, a ludicrous and unlooked-for thing of staves and hoops.

McKinnon watched this barrel, in wonder, for it seemed to shift about by itself. Then it began to roll slowly forward. It advanced towards the rifle-pit, inch by inch, propelled by no visible human hand. It moved ponderously onward, foot by foot, as though it had been endowed with some miraculous power of locomotion.

Then it came to a stop, on a barren "hog-back," high above the ground that surrounded it. But even before the betraying black finger of a rifle-end appeared cautiously and slowly above

one corner of it, McKinnon knew it was a blind, a moving shelter. He knew it was a barrel filled with sand, a roughly improvised ambuscade being pushed forward by some intrepid sharp-shooter from De Brigard's camp.

The man in the rifle-pit watched that barrel, uneasily, frowningly, firing maliciously at it, from time to time, as it advanced and stopped and delivered its whistling challenge of lead and still again crawled onward. It seemed a thing to fear and hate, like some venomous and loathsome dinosaurian reptile armoured against attack. Then the man watching it schooled himself to calmness, and fired more deliberately, studying his sight and range and trajectory, feeling his way about that incongruous and repulsive enemy with a hissing *antenna* of lead.

When the rifle-end showed again McKinnon fired, as calmly and judiciously as before, but this time three inches to the right of the rifle-end and the fraction of an inch lower.

He had the satisfaction of beholding a pair of hands thrown up in the air, wide apart, and of knowing that the rifle had fallen to the ground. Beyond that there was no sign. But the sand-barrel did not move again.

Then, as he watched with heavy eyes, he caught sight of a figure on horseback, circling out from what must have been the most south-

erly edge of De Brigard's camp to the higher stretch of the creek-bank. He saw the horseman stop, gesticulate, and apparently give orders. Then he swung about again, and circled out of sight. But five minutes after he had done so a second line of infantry détoured from the coppice-screened fringes of the camp and crept in towards the men who had earlier in the day taken their position along the creek-bed. Each man, McKinnon saw, carried a rifle. And again he wondered if the *Princeton* had reached Puerto Locombia, and again he secretly and desperately prayed that help would still come to them. Then he called to the girl at his side.

"They're going to try to rush us!" he explained to her, very quietly. But he found it hard to say to her just what he wanted to say.

"Can they?" she asked; her faith in him, now, was blind and unreasoning.

"Well, they'll pay for it!" was all he had the heart to say, as he swung his reloaded rifle up to the dusty wall-top.

He did not speak again, for there was no time for it. He was firing now, quickly and yet dispassionately. He caught up one gun after the other and poured his fire into the shifting and advancing shadows cut out with cameo-like clearness in the full afternoon sunlight. He kept firing, feverishly, and yet almost uncon-

cernedly, until the magazines were emptied and the barrels were too hot to hold. But he could no longer keep his ground clear. They were at last clearing the creek-bank, clearing it in swarms. They were finally overwhelming him, in sheer force of numbers.

Powder-smoke enveloped him. Dust and splinters flew about him. Runnels of sweat ran down his lean and grimy face. But still he kept firing, faster and faster, pouring his lead into the advancing line in a frenzy of hopelessness.

Then one of the guns jammed, irretrievably. He caught up the other, and emptied it, until the overheated steel scorched his shaking hand. But still the ragged and shouting line came on, unchecked. He had nothing but the revolvers to fall back on. So he snatched them and stood up to it, breast-high above the sand-box rampart in front of him.

“Come on, you cowards!” he exulted, drunkenly, reelingly, as he faced and watched the spitting and snapping and ever-advancing line, for he knew it was the end. Then the girl dragged him down, while she reloaded, and caught up the third revolver and stood at his side, with her breast against a smoke-blackened cartridge-box.

“It’s the end!” he said.

"I know!" she answered, moving closer, so that her body touched his.

But the line she looked out on was not the same line that McKinnon had last seen. It had shifted and wheeled, in an inexplicable side-movement. It had crumpled and twisted up on itself, like leaves caught and tossed in a wind-eddy.

Then a cry burst from her throat, a cry of sheer joy, and she caught at McKinnon's arm.

"Look!" she said, with a sob.

For swinging about the track-curve were two flat-cars. Mounted on these cars she could see glimmering and burnished machine-guns. And behind these guns stood cheering and shouting bluejackets, stabbing the air with adder-like tongues of flame as the spinning chambers were discharged and the puffing locomotive pushed them slowly upward along the narrow track.

They seemed little more than boys, those quick-moving and bright-eyed jackies. They were shouting with the foolish joy and pride of youth at the thought of its first baptism of fire. They seemed like an excursion of madmen to McKinnon. He wondered what they meant, where they came from. But he could not give them much thought. He had other things to think of—for a wounded Locombian, a little brown-faced demon with a long-barrelled maga-

zine-rifle, was crawling towards him on a broken thigh, taking pot-shots as he came. And McKinnon knew he had to hold that man off, and it worried him to think that he had only a revolver to do it with. But he fired and re-loaded and fired, leaning out over his wall-top and hurling half-delirious imprecations into the smoke-hung air. He fought on, to the last, like a man in a dream. All the world, to him, had become a chaotic pit of contending spirits who clamoured for his blood.

Then he was stirred and disturbed by the sudden scream of the girl at his side. Her voice seemed to come from a great distance; it smote on his ear thinly, as though heard through a wall.

“You’re wounded!” she cried, foolishly, hysterically. He denied it, indifferently, and wondered why he was no longer standing beside his cartridge-boxes. He saw her white and smoke-streaked face bent over his arm and heard her repeated cry of alarm as she tore away a part of his ragged shirt-sleeve. He could see her fingers, when she lifted them; they were wet, and dark-red in colour. Then he knew that she was tearing some part of her dress, that she was binding and twisting a strip of linen about his arm, somewhere below the left shoulder.

She twisted and tightened it cruelly; but he was too tired to argue with her about it. He felt it would be best to humour her; she had had to endure so much for him. And it was rather pleasant, he told himself, having her fussing about him that way. But he wished she wouldn't cry and shake, and that he could explain to her how much he wanted to go to sleep. Then he was roused by more shouts and cries, and by a voice quite close to him, which said, in wonder: "Good God, he's a *white* man!" Then came more men, and a sudden order for someone to stand back.

McKinnon opened his eyes, wearily, and saw a yellow-faced stranger with a pointed gray beard. He wore a uniform like an officer's, and carried a sword from a red silk sash, a foolish and womanish-looking sash. Then came other men and other officers, and a thin and far-away babbling of voices, till the yellow sand where the car lay changed into a lake of swarming and crowding human beings, into a sea of little brown-faced jumping-jacks who shouted and contorted and flung foolish little red-striped army-caps up in the air, gibbering and arguing and calling, all the while, in some outlandish and incomprehensible tongue.

McKinnon neither knew nor cared what it meant. He only wanted to get somewhere

where it was quiet, where he could rest in peace. Then the noise grew louder again, and a shouting and cheering column of bluejackets swung up, followed by a swarthy-skinned band of horsemen, with carbines, on prancing little Peruvian ponies. McKinnon could see that they were tearing his boxes open, that they were carrying away his precious ammunition.

He tried to fight against them, but he found himself held down, and through the drifting sand-dust he saw Alicia's white face bent low over him. Then somebody called out angrily: "Stand back there! Back!" and a huge hairy white hand tried to choke the breath of life out of his body by pouring what seemed liquid fire down his throat, from a leather-covered flask. This flask was quickly and mercifully knocked to one side, by an angry-faced man in white duck, who wore spectacles and said in perfect English: "Get the poor beggar into a *fiacre*!" Then there was the repeated cry of "Stand back!" and "To the Hospital!" and "No; to the Palace!" and the next moment hands were hauling and lifting at his tortured body. He felt, at times, that a woman was weeping somewhere beside him. But he could not be sure of this. He heard a thin and ghostlike pound of hoofs and a rumble of wheels. And that was all he could remember.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE LAST WORD

McKINNON was very happy. It was six long days since they had dug the bullet out of his arm and told him to lie quiet for a while and rest up and make blood. But on this particular morning President Duran's own glimmering state-coach had carried him away from the Hospital, and he had been given prompt and official permission to go to the Palace roof, where Aikens, the Boston youth who acted as the Guariqui operator, was still struggling over his half-renovated wireless apparatus.

So McKinnon had been carried to the roof in a chair, by two of Duran's own body-guard, and the white sunlight and the many-tinted city and the companionship of the lonely and garrulous boy from Boston went to his head, like wine, and left him foolishly and wistfully happy.

He laughed at the idea of a corrugated-iron wireless station on the roof of a Palace; it seemed as incongruous to him, he told Aikens,

as a Crusader smoking a Pittsburg stogie, or a monastery with mail-chutes, or a cathedral with a cash-register. Then Aikens led him to the battlemented edge of the flat roof and showed him the arc-lights that swung in Avenida Sacramento and Calle Florida, and the new power-house toward Paraiso Hill, and the statuary that gleamed through the green palms of the Parque Nacional, and the Asilo Chapai and the roof of the new Boynton Hospital, and the columned front of the Theatro Locombio. Then he drew himself up and protested that Guariqui wasn't such a one-horse town, after all.

McKinnon continued to look down at Guariqui, after Aikens had gone back to his work. He could see the iron-fenced Palace gardens, cool and shadowy and secluded-looking. In the Plaza beyond he could see the splash of water from a frond-hidden fountain, and the white statue of some unknown hero who had died in some unknown war for Locombian liberty. He could see the yellow front of the cathedral and the sun-steeped Prado white with dust. He could see the American bluejackets, from the *Princeton*, who were still picketing the streets, and a bullock-cart that crawled noisily over the cobblestones.

At the head of Avenida Sacramento he could see another detachment of white-helmeted

marines clustered about one of the *Princeton*'s machine guns. He could make out a scattered group of Ulloa's mounted Irregulars crawling in toward Guariqui, across the undulating, flat-shadowed plain of burnt grass. He could see rows of flat houses and red-tiled roofs, and tame buzzards perched on ridge-poles, and a lonely and high-standing royal palm or two. And beyond the sun-bathed town and the burnt plain lay the gray-green hills and the lonely blue peaks of the Cordilleras.

Then the sound of cheering floated up to him, and to the east, advancing along Calle Nacional toward the Plaza, was a long line of infantry headed by a mounted band that broke into shrill and stirring music as they détoured in past the turreted barracks. He could see the gathering street crowds, the men in linen and duck, the bareheaded women in mantillas, the *Princeton*'s midshipmen in tight-fitting tunics, pretending to ignore the heat, the marching lines of barefooted men in grotesquely soiled and ragged uniforms.

He knew that De Brigard's movement had been crushed, that the revolution was already a thing of the past. There was a smouldering province or two on the lower Pacific slope, but a week or two of gun-seizing by Arturo Boyn-ton's mounted police would stifle all that was

left of Ganley's *coup d'état*. And Ganley himself? He knew that Ulloa was still patrolling the coast to cut off Ganley's escape. He wondered, with a strange sense of detachment, just where between the blue peaks of the Cordilleras and the Caribbean's pulsing surf-line that man of destiny was skulking and hiding. He wondered where under that unpitying and high-arching tropical sky the lonely fugitive was still scheming and plotting and battling for his ultimate prerogative, for his mortal right to live.

Yes, it was all over and done, McKinnon told himself, wearily, as a comprehension of the solitudes that enisled him began to creep like a slowly rising tide through every fibre of his being. They meant nothing to him, these outlandish soldiers in ragged uniform, this sun-baked city among its lonely hills, these denim-clad peons with long-bladed machetes, these red-tiled homes of a people who were foreign to him, this over-gaudy Latin palace with its second-rate statuary and its gilding and mirrors that would be an affront to a Hudson River steamboat's cabin. It was a land of strangers to him. He suddenly knew that he was homesick for the North.

He was possessed with a longing for the older and more austere ways of life, for more tranquil and muffled and orderly days, for the

crowded and companionable cities of his own kind. There seemed something barbaric to him in the very music of the band that brayed and shrilled from the streets below. In the men who followed that band he could make out the narrow shoulders and the protruding cheek-bones of Carib-Indian blood. They seemed more than outlanders to him; they were scarcely white men. And he was tired of them and their foolish little wars; he was homesick.

He heard a movement at his side, and he looked up from the embrasure over which he leaned to see Alicia Boynton standing almost within reach of his hand. She seemed nearly ghost-like, to his first startled glance, for she was dressed in white linen, and the things through which she had passed and many days and nights of anxiety had left her face still colourless. The strong sunlight, too, accentuated the wistful little hollow that had crept into her cheek. The touch of tragedy which this shadow in some way gave to her face was contradicted, though, by the deep and happy look in her eyes.

Yet as she stood there at McKinnon's side the strangeness and the loneliness of Guariqui seemed almost to fade away. She humanised it and brought it nearer to him. Then his eyes fell on the figure of an officer in full uniform, passing in through the Palace gates, with his

scabbard in his gauntleted hand. He was as gilded and as ornamental as a character from a Broadway musical comedy. But he served to bring a wayward surge of misery over the soul of the American.

McKinnon sighed, openly and audibly. He could recall, only too easily, the beginning of that vague unhappiness. It had first come to birth in the Hospital, when General Alcantara, as Alicia had called him, accompanied her to the bed in the little blue-walled ward. He was a dapper and dashing officer, and in explaining that he had once studied at West Point, Alicia suggested that the two of them might have much in common. But McKinnon had resented that youthful officer's presence at her side, from the first. From the first, too, he had despised the over-ready and white-toothed smile, the padded and punctilious little figure, the fawn-like eyes of Latin brown, as soft as a woman's. He had even more resented the panther-like grace of the scrupulously uniformed little figure, and the tropic-born cadences of the light-noted and carefully modulated voice as the two of them chatted and laughed together. It made McKinnon think of himself as awkward and ungainly, as raw and raucous in his address to women. He had maintained the pretence, to himself, that it did not matter, that it never could or

would matter. But he knew, at last, that this was not true, that it mattered more than he dared admit.

“You mustn’t do this,” the girl was saying, reprovingly, as she drew closer beside him, so that her tinted parasol threw its shadow over his head.

“But it’s so good to be out again,” he said. “And they’re giving Ulloa’s Irregulars an ovation down there.”

“But you’re not strong yet,” she warned him, looking up into his face with anxious eyes.

“Strong!” he laughed. “Why, I feel like a shorthorn in from the range!”

“But that is a tropical sun you are standing in.”

“It isn’t the sun that makes me feel so bad,” he confessed. “It’s being so far away from—
from home, from—oh, from everything!”

There was a minute or two of silence as they stood gazing down over Guariqui.

“I know,” she said at last, comprehendingly. He looked down at her, a little surprised at the humility in her voice. She had seemed a little aloof from him during the last few days; he had not been able to guess at the source of that aloofness. Guariqui and its official life, he felt, had flung a bar between them. It seemed to have drawn and shut her in as one of its own.

He had grown almost afraid of her, since the morning he had seen her from his window, sitting up so slender and fragile in Duran's flashing official landau as it swept out through the Palace gates surrounded by galloping and gorgeous cuirassiers with brazen breastplates and horsetail helmets. And the consciousness of this alienation brought a touch of bitterness into his voice as he went on.

"No; I don't believe you *do* know. This is the life you were born to. This is your home. It means everything to you!"

"Not everything," she corrected him, very quietly. He could not see her face, for she was gazing out over Paraiso Hill.

"But I know you would never be happy away from it, from everything here that has been making me feel so lost and miserable, any more than I would be happy away from the things that would make *you* feel lost and miserable."

She glanced up with a little look of surprise.

"I'm not a Locombian," she said, laughing a little.

It was his turn to laugh, though there was little mirth in it.

"No; but you are the sister of Dr. Arturo Boynton, Minister of War for the Republic of Locombia, Member of the Federal—"

She looked up at him again, and met his gaze without hesitation.

“And you are the man who saved the Republic of Locombia from—well, you know what from!”

He threw up his hand with a gesture of protest.

“I was thinking hanged little about the Republic of Locombia,” he retorted, with his cheery and companionable laugh. “I wanted to get you out of that Ganley mess.”

“Then you saved *me*,” she protested.

“When I happened as a primary consideration to be fighting to save my own precious neck!” he deprecated.

He noticed the silent reproof in her eyes, and as he saw it a new courage began to grope upward out of the darkness of his heart. He thought, a little enviously, of the days when she had been so close to him, when the arm of no intervening convention had stretched out between them. Then he thought of the blood and dust and grime of his battle, of the blood and dust and grime that lay over so many of his years. And all his life suddenly seemed an empty and aimless and wasted life to him. It seemed an affront to her, even to tell her how unworthy he was, yet the growing hunger and ache in his heart forbade him to keep silent. He watched

a condor wheeling above the gray-green hill-tops until it became a drifting black speck in the turquoise sky.

The glare of open light made his eyes ache. He remembered a certain sentence of Ganley's: "It's not what you'd call a white man's country." The thought of that brought his troubled gaze back to the woman at his side.

"Have you always been happy here?" he demanded, audaciously.

"Are we ever *always* happy?" she asked, after a silence.

"But do you *expect* to be happy, humanly happy, here?"

She shook her head, slowly, from side to side.

"Not now," she answered.

Again a mocking flame of hope shot through him. But he did not speak. Her hand lay on the embrasure beside him. He reached out his arm and quietly covered the white fingers with his own. His mournful glance met hers, and for the first time the full significance of her nearness came home to him. She drew back a little, frightened, and slowly raised her head. The touch of her hand on his had turned his very blood to fire.

"I love you," he said, without moving. She swayed a little beside the embrasure; but she did not speak. He reached out his unbandaged

arm, as she still stood gazing at him, and made a movement, a hungry and pleading movement, as though to draw her closer to him. "I love you," he repeated, inadequately.

A soft and luminous beauty crept into her face with its tragic little hollow under either cheek-bone; it seemed to suffuse and renew and transform it as spring itself transforms the world. She raised her hands slowly, almost mournfully, as though it cost her a great effort, until they rested on his shoulders.

"I am not worthy of it," she said, with a break in her voice that was almost a sob. She would have said more, but her speech was silenced by his movement, a movement which brought her trembling into his arms.

"I have always loved you," she whispered, weakly.

"And you would go back with me?" he pleaded.

"Anywhere," she answered, as she raised her wistfully smiling lips to his. "To the end of the world!"

Some wordless languor of surrender left the suddenly saddened lips still parted, and caused her heavy eyelids to droop over unquestioning and capitulating eyes. It was an elemental and absolute relinquishment, as quiet and yet as complete as the surrender to Death itself,

touched with sorrow only as all things that fringe on the Infinite are so touched. It was love, the deep love that lives only in deep souls.

They were alone under the high-arching tropical sun. The condor wheeled back over Paraiso Hill unnoticed; barefooted soldiers in ragged denim marched by under the Palace unseen; Ulloa's mounted band brayed itself into the distance unheard.

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE LAST DEBT

It was Aikens, the wireless-operator, who brought McKinnon and Alicia back to the world of reality.

“I’ve got ‘em!” he called excitedly, from his little station door shadowed by its awning of faded striped canvas. “I’ve picked something up!”

He disappeared from sight, and McKinnon could hear the crackle and spit of his “spark” across the “spark-gap.”

Then the youth reappeared under the faded striped awning. He held a much-worn Panama hat in his hand, and he approached the older man with some hesitation.

“Could you help me out for a few minutes?” he asked, with a hand-wave towards his “station.”

“What’s wrong?”

“I’ve got to get somebody from the War

Office. I ought to have the President here, now."

"What is it?" asked Alicia, as they crossed to the "station" door.

"It's Boracao calling the *Princeton*. It's going to be the last rocket-fizz of this fireworks exhibition."

He flung on a coat and turned to McKinnon.

"But please watch that responder until I get back!"

And he was off before McKinnon could adjust the phones and take his seat before the instrument.

But as the newcomer pressed the receiver against his ear, he could hear a sound, faint and small, like the tick of a wood-beetle. This sound translated itself into a coherent sequence of dots and dashes, spelling out the call for "Cruiser *Princeton*" and repeating it, impatiently, with a strangely human note of complaint in the petulance of the wood-beetle tickings.

"*Princeton—Princeton*," the call was repeated, almost frantically, it seemed to McKinnon, as he caught up the operator's pencil and began to write on the paper before him. Then came the break and the answer of the far-off cruiser. Something in the crisply stiff "send" of the navy operator reminded the listener of

the tightly jacketed midshipmen in the Plaza below him. Then came the hurrying dots and dashes of the Boracao operator:

Detachment of Morazan's Scouts captured American named Ganley this morning at daybreak. Ganley held here in *quartel*—condemned to death by *fusilado* after drumhead court-martial by Morazan. He claims to be American citizen and wants protection of his government. I cannot get Guariqui—station there dead for seven days past. Hurry in relief on receipt of this or will be too late. If possible land marines at San Antonio Inlet and push overland to Boracao by way of Agira River Trail. I have done everything in my power, but am helpless. You must hurry—is to be shot at sunset.

ADOLPH KLAUSER,

American Consul, Boracao.

McKinnon handed the written sheet to Alicia without speaking.

She read it and handed it back to him. Her hand was shaking a little.

“What can we do?” she asked, almost in a whisper.

“There's nothing we can do,” was McKinnon's answer. “Our coils are still out of order. They're still too weak to send!”

“But we can't stand here and see the man die—now—in that way!”

McKinnon suddenly held up a hand for silence, for the *Princeton* was sending again:

Cannot land men before communicating with Guariqui. Ask suspension of execution of American named Ganley for day or two until Guariqui conference.

LIEUTENANT VERDU.

Then came a break and another wait, while from somewhere far off in the streets below floated up the bray and throb of the military band. Then a second Boracao message trickled down through the Guariqui wires and stirred the coherer into feeble life:

Can do nothing. Morazan claims acting for General Ulloa under President Duran's orders. But whole thing terrible mistake. We must have help at once, or innocent and law-abiding citizens will be murdered. Send men and heliograph advance from San Antonio Hill.

KLAUSER.

Aiken's hurried return with two orderlies and an officer in full uniform kept McKinnon from intercepting the *Princeton*'s reply. The little station had suddenly become close and stifling. He felt weak and unstrung, and was glad to gain the open air and find the quiet sunlight and the slowly waving palms about him once more. He was glad to know that the woman he loved stood at his side, and that their future life was to be a life far from such scenes.

They were still there, side by side above the embrasure, when the hurrying Aikens, as he darted below-stairs, thrust a sheet of carbon-copy into their hands as he passed. McKinnon held it up and read it aloud:

American named Ganley just shot down by *quartel* guards as he broke jail here—body surrendered to me by *alcalde*—am holding it awaiting instructions.

KLAUSER.

The sheet fluttered to the ground.

“It’s over,” said the woman, covering her face with her hands, while a movement that was almost a shiver crept through her stooping body.

“Yes, it’s over now,” echoed McKinnon, absently, as his arm went out to sustain her. And they sat there, alone with their thoughts, for many minutes.

THE END



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